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Globalization and Its Metaphors

*John Miller**

As we move into the twenty-first century, no question promises to be more complicated or to have larger implications for the lives of Americans and non-Americans alike than the impact of globalization. That Jim Chen has approached this issue with such verve and insight in his essay "Globalization and Its Losers" makes it all the more important that we consider his argument carefully and clear-mindedly, lest we be dazzled by its erudition and too easily succumb to its logic.

Many of Chen's observations and assertions are convincing and helpful. The powerful impact of the American mass media and "cultural machine" make resistance to them in many countries and regions difficult, if not impossible. Television, as he notes, has become a great leveler, and there is a tendency for place to become irrelevant in our modern, media-saturated society. Schumpeterian "creative destruction," while often wreaking havoc with traditional economies and societies, has, on the whole, been economically beneficial for the people affected by it. Liberalized trade has generally redounded to the overall economic benefit of countries on both sides of the equation. In considering the costs and gains generated by globalization, environmental claims should be separated from economic ones. Small-scale communities often are less humane in taking care of people and more dangerous to the environment than are large-scale ones. All of these points, and many others, help clarify our situation and enable us to think better about our predicament.

My major concern with Professor Chen's argument relates to his central metaphor—Darwinian evolution. More specifically, the author seems especially enamored of the extinction metaphor, contending that just as various species lose out in the battle for survival in the biological realm, various groups and job descriptions will inevitably lose their reason for being in our new, globalized economy. My objection lies not in the use of metaphor as a persuasive device, for by now we all understand that the sciences—including economics—are heavily rhetorical in nature.¹ The problem lies not in metaphors, as such, but rather in

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1. JOHN S. NELSON, ALLAN MEGILL, AND D.N. MCCLOSKEY (EDS), *THE RHETORIC OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES: LANGUAGE AND ARGUMENT IN SCHOLARSHIP AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS* (1997).

their relevance and applicability. Economic discourse is inherently metaphorical; what we need to determine is whether the ones being used are good ones or bad ones.²

A variety of metaphors have been suggested to enable us to better understand the phenomenon of globalization. Chen likens it to a "steamroller." Others compare it to a "false dawn"³; to a "wondrous new machine" that "reaps as it destroys"⁴; to a turbo-charged vehicle⁵; and to a Lexus factory which coexists in a world where battles rage over olive trees.⁶

Applying the metaphor of biological evolution to the global economy is not entirely inapt. The marketplace is constantly changing. Competition marks relationships within and across national boundaries; there are always winners and losers. And frequently the losers do not merely suffer; they lose their purpose for being as new technologies emerge, they lose their ability to compete in the marketplace, or new constraints emerge to put them out of business. The similarity between what happens in the international marketplace and what happens in the biological realm makes the application of the metaphor helpful, in a certain restricted sense, but, when pushed too far, it can also mislead and distort reality. I think that is what is happening in this instance.

Our natural reaction to hearing the biological metaphor (and especially the extinction metaphor) applied to the economy is to recall the problems with and the ideological burdens surrounding the development of "social Darwinism" during the late 1800s.⁷ Certainly aware of this and wishing to head off critics who might try to equate his ideas with that hoary concept, Chen notes its "sorry history" and implies that his use of the evolutionary metaphor is not subject to the same mistakes. His acceptance of the idea of large, governmentally-mandated wealth transfers, to cite one example, certainly distances him from latter-day Spencerians and Sumnerians, but his willingness to allow long-established traditions and ways of life to be

2. D.N. McCLOSKEY, *THE RHETORIC OF ECONOMICS* 13, 40 (2ND. ED. 1998).

3. JOHN GRAY, *FALSE DAWN: THE DELUSIONS OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM* (1998).

4. WILLIAM GREIDER, *ONE WORLD, READY OR NOT: THE MANIC LOGIC OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM* 11 (1997).

5. EDWARD LUTTWAK, *TURBO-CAPITALISM: WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY* (1999).

6. THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, *THE LEXUS AND THE OLIVE TREE* 26-29 (1999).

7. RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *SOCIAL DARWINISM IN AMERICAN THOUGHT* (rev. ed. 1959); MORTON WHITE, *SOCIAL THOUGHT IN AMERICA: THE REVOLT AGAINST FORMALISM* (1949).

extinguished in the wake of market-driven social and economic change reunites him with the social Darwinists, who were ready to sacrifice entire categories of people to the steamroller of economic growth and development.

What is wrong with the evolutionary metaphor, as Chen employs it? In the first place, it lacks consistency. For example, his willingness to contemplate large wealth transfers as a way of "buying off" losers or providing some minimal justice for them seems inconsistent with the realities of "tooth-and-claw" competition in the biological realm where losers die off and do not become the beneficiaries of well-intentioned "do-gooders."

Secondly, biological evolution depends upon random variation and the consequent advantages these variations confer on individuals in their struggle for survival. The evolution of human societies, on the other hand, is heavily influenced by the intelligence, skills, and knowledge that are gained over time—the accumulation of "human capital" that Theodore Schultz and others have done so much to elucidate.⁸ Human societies do not have to evolve blindly, but their development can be guided by human intelligence.⁹

A third problem with the evolutionary metaphor involves the level at which it is said to operate. Jim Chen applies it first to individuals, who, because of lack of skills or because of being in the wrong industry or the wrong place, are no longer viable; in consequence, whole categories of people and occupations become expendable, e.g., cotton sharecroppers, traveling sales representatives, and Linotype operators. While switchboard operators and piano players in silent movie houses will never be demanded anywhere, many occupations become outmoded in particular places because they can no longer compete with more efficient producers elsewhere. The author would like to add large numbers of American farmers and automobile workers to the obsolescent category, for they have been beneficiaries, in his view, of misplaced federal subsidies and trade intervention. At the societal level, he argues that many institutions and cultural practices will have to accept victim status during the evolutionary process.

The question that arises here is at what level should the evolutionary metaphor be applied—that of the individual, the firm, the economic region, or the nation-state? Different consid-

8. THEODORE W. SCHULTZ, *INVESTING IN PEOPLE: THE ECONOMICS OF POPULATION QUALITY* (1981).

9. LESTER F. WARD, *DYNAMIC SOCIOLOGY* (1883).

erations operate at different levels. While it may be acceptable to eliminate the jobs of individuals in weakly competitive industries and individual firms within industries, factors may be operating at the national level why at least a certain minimum level of production should be maintained in those industries. The interests of nations encompass more than purely economic considerations. For reasons of safety and security, for example, it is desirable for the United States to maintain steel, petroleum, and agricultural production. For other nations, too, becoming totally dependent on other nations for certain basic goods is risky.

A fourth problem with the evolutionary metaphor relates to its applicability across different sectors—the economy, language and culture, religion, etc. The author makes some persuasive arguments for the irresistible force of memes in obliterating local variants and replacing them with new, standardized specimens—of economic production, cultural output, language, and spiritual manifestations. The logical conclusion to such imperialistic assumptions would seem to lead in the direction of some kind of utopian/distopian world in which all local variations have been replaced by single, overwhelming, and unopposable ideas and powers—“Brave New World” incarnate.

It may be true that American cultural productions have overrun much of the world, that many foreign languages are endangered, and that traditional religious beliefs are under challenge from new developments in science, technology, education, and communication. But there is plenty of evidence on the other side, too—the power of ethnicity and “multiculturalism,” the rise of religious fundamentalism in many countries, and the persistence of high levels of religious belief in the United States itself.¹⁰ What may be truer in the economic realm, as multinational corporations gobble up their competitors and powerful integrative forces pull the world into an ever tighter weave, remains much less true in the realms of culture, society, and politics. Strong tendencies toward differentiation and local variation remain powerful. Extinction of these variations does not appear to be imminent.

The ultimate problem with the biological metaphor lies in its lack of a standard of value by which to judge the results of the process. Biological evolution makes no distinction between good and bad results. What happens, happens; what is, is.

10. ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, *THE DISUNITING OF AMERICA* (1992); BENJAMIN BARBER, *JIHAD VS. McWORLD* (1995).

“Higher” and “lower” are not acknowledged. In the end, survival is the test. If bugs and microbes outlast humans, they win the prize. As a member of humanity, I am ready to assert the superiority of my own over other species—not only its importance but its desirability. Man is an animal, but one created just “a little lower than the angels.”¹¹ If that be classified an article of faith, it must also be acknowledged that the evolutionary metaphor, as well as the “big bang” theory, quantum mechanics, and any number of other “scientific” truths, are articles of faith, too.¹²

Human beings are economic actors, seeking their own welfare. But they are also social, cultural, and spiritual beings.¹³ If any economic proposition is well-established, it is that money does not necessarily buy happiness.¹⁴ Most people have “set points” regulating their level of satisfaction. It is certainly true that human beings crave change and movement, and Americans, of all people, may be the most restless.¹⁵ The biographies of successful men and women almost invariably include a move away from one’s place of birth and, after that, a disproportionate number of further moves. There is even a certain amount of truth in asserting that “the losers stay put,” but this also obscures a basic reality—that a major value of human life is a rootedness in place.¹⁶

To observe that the modern mass media and global economy have a tendency to obliterate place does not necessarily mean that place has become irrelevant. Places, it is true, have become increasingly similar over time, and people certainly have become more mobile. But attachment to place is a value that has increasing salience in recent times. Yi-Fu Tuan, Tony Hiss, James Howard Kunstler,¹⁷ and others have been educating us about

11. PSALMS 8:5; compare Peter Singer, *ANIMAL LIBERATION* (2d. ed. 1990).

12. THOMAS KUHN, *THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS* (2d ed. 1970).

13. HANS GERTH AND C. WRIGHT MILLS, *CHARACTER AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS* 10-15 (1953); E. TORY HIGGINS AND ARIE W. KRUGLANSKI (eds), *SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: HANDBOOK OF BASIC PRINCIPLES* (1996); RENE DUBOIS, *SO HUMAN AN ANIMAL* (1968).

14. J. JEREMY SEABROOK, *WHAT WENT WRONG? WHY HASN’T HAVING MORE MADE PEOPLE HAPPIER?* 9-14 (1978); ROBERT SAMUELSON, *THE GOOD LIFE AND ITS DISCONTENTS: THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE AGE OF ENTITLEMENT, 1945-1995* 3-4 (1995).

15. GEORGE W. PIERSON, *THE MOVING AMERICAN* (1975).

16. EUGENE V. WALTER, *PLACEWAYS: A THEORY OF THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT* (1988).

17. YI-FU TUAN, *TOPOPHILIA: A STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION, ATTITUDES, AND VALUES* (1974); TONY HISS, *THE EXPERIENCE OF PLACE* (1990);

what we have lost in making automobiles our god, letting interstate highways run roughshod over the environment, and paving over the countryside with McDonalds restaurants, Wal-Marts, and twenty-four-screen multiplexes. It all happened so fast that few people paid much attention to it until it was almost too late. We needed a Lewis Mumford or a Henry David Thoreau to remind us of our connection to the wild and to human-scale community. Now, as we find ourselves increasingly ensconced in cookie-cutter suburbs, parking lots, megamalls, and edge cities, forward-looking thinkers are trying to show us back to where we came from.

For many millennia of human history, people understood the importance of place in the quality of their lives. Few things—besides, perhaps, physical survival and one's relationship with God—were considered more important. It is easy to forget how recently physical place came to be seen as unimportant in defining human happiness. Not until the twentieth century—with the rise of the automobile, air travel, mass media, and the computer—did the possibility of separating ourselves from place become conceivable.

What is wanted and needed is not a reversion to a position where one is defined by the place one has been born or finds oneself in currently. Rather, we need a rational reassessment of the qualities and things that make life livable. A place that provides economic opportunity, has aesthetic distinction, supports cooperative community, and sustains active political involvement is one of the things we long for. Quantitative measures of economic production and consumption are certainly desirable, but they form only one part of the equation. By establishing biodiversity and environmental quality as the highest priority, Chen stakes out the high ground. But in relegating culture to a subordinate position and in being willing to sacrifice it to global economic growth, he takes a wrong turn. We need to continue to grow, but we also need to understand when we have enough. Chen takes account of this when he halfheartedly notes the desirability of wealth redistribution, but it is essential in addressing questions like those being discussed here to get back to basics.

We need to ask, "What is an economy for?" This inevitably is bound up in questions of value. We need to inquire into the good life and into what kinds of physical, social, cultural, and

political—as well as spiritual—conditions sustain and promote it. Economic considerations are important, but while necessary, they are not sufficient. And as Michael Polanyi notes in *The Great Transformation*, the market economy ineluctably erodes traditional social relationships and threatens to destroy the very institutions upon which it rests.¹⁸

Perhaps other metaphors could serve better in approaching the subject than that of biological evolution. How about a household? Using it, we would have to consider, in addition to production and consumption, the qualities of personal interaction, community, and relationship to place. Just as the academic discipline of home economics went wrong when it turned its focus to food and clothing production and home finance, rather than taking a more holistic approach to the quality of relationships in the family and to philosophical questions of what constitute a good life, we today go wrong when we focus too exclusively on economic matters to the exclusion of moral and social considerations.

Or why not take the theater as metaphor? “All the world’s a stage,” Shakespeare said, and we all play a myriad of roles on the stages we inhabit. We enact many more roles than simply the economic. We are family members, citizens, neighbors, friends, community residents, helpers, facilitators, leisure participants, artists, questers, seekers, and dreamers. If we can’t build a good life with twice as much, four times as much, eight times as much stuff as our ancestors had, can we realistically expect to become happy in the future with two times, four times, eight times as much as we consume now?

Or why not think of ourselves as a sports team? A baseball team has nine players on the field at any given time. Each person has a specific role to play. The players on the bench have their assigned duties, too. Different teams have different characters. One may rely on home run hitting, another may win with singles hitters, and a third one with speed and defense. Once again, variety rules. All are not forced into the same mold. Local differences matter.

Finally, consider education as a metaphor. Wouldn’t a school serve at least as well as evolutionary biology for explaining what goes on in the global economy? Chen’s argument essentially boils down to this: Globalization inevitably renders

18. See MICHAEL POLANYI, *THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION* 150, 163 (1944); See also DANIEL BELL, *THE CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF CAPITALISM* 15, 21-22 (1976).

many occupations and activities extinct; get used to it. In a school, we study the world and seek to find ways to adapt to it. Rather than simply accepting or celebrating the destruction that accompanies globalization, we try to learn what impacts are entailed, what their costs and benefits are, what kinds of alternatives are possible, and how we might implement those alternatives. The education metaphor operates on the understanding that there are many goods, that economic goals should not be given *carte blanche*, and that human beings can imagine and implement new alternatives in the process of adjustment.

In conclusion, while acknowledging the importance of the challenge Professor Chen has thoughtfully posed for us and the validity of many of his claims, I doubt the relevance of his central metaphor and urge the consideration of other metaphors that might open new perspectives and be more useful to us.