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Livelihood in the Time of Globalization*

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Editor's Note

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Among the items that constitute the immediate profile of our globalizing world are these revolutionary features: (a) an accelerating demise of rural life to such an extent that nearly fifty percent of all peoples live in urban environments; (b) out of the eighteen world cities with a population of ten million people or more, only a couple are located in the Global North; (c) of the thirty-two urban areas with a million people or more, the quickest growing are all but one (the Portuguese city of Porto) in Africa, Asia, and south of the Rio Grande—the first with six, the second has twenty, and five belong to the third region; and (d) the rise of thick networks that offer hitherto unheard of profitable interactions that almost defy the constraints of time and space. Thus, many strongly feel that formally revisiting the concept of *development*, essentially defined as integration into the global system, is rather quaint, if not passé. For instance, keen analysts, from popular authors such as Alvaro Vargas Llosa, Thomas Friedman, Lowell Bryan, and Diana Farrell of McKinsey and Co, to scholars like Hernando de Soto and Francis Fukuyama, the term's shelf-life has expired as a result of the pervasive, successful, and continuing breakdown of cultural, economic, ecological, and even political barriers. This type of cosmopolitanism underscores the possibilities of a new form of virtuous individual and collective nomadism, available to all who have the appetite and are ready to venture out and seize opportunities.¹ The earlier achievements of the "Asian Tigers" and the astounding upsurge of the People's Republic of China, India, and, to a lesser extent, Brazil are brought forth as part of the latest and indisputable evidence for this positive energy of the phenomenon of globalization. Consequently, the advice to those in pursuit of better livelihoods can be summarized thus: shed your indigenous liabilities and step up to partake of competitive globalization by embracing freedom and the laws of capitalist market economics. Such was the mantra, particularly in the wake of the Cold War and the subsequent disappearance of the statist paradigm. An enshrinement of market economic orthodoxy specifically stresses private ownership, unencumbered accumulation, individual initiative and choice, and a drastic shrinkage of public powers. While the current moment of grievous downturn (even in the core societies) has thrown up doubts about such celebratory wisdom, true believers still hang on to the basic premises of the perspective: any public intervention would

have to be a light and temporary corrective to a few “natural” malfunctions.²

For other thinkers, the syndrome of “combined and uneven development” has not changed a great deal. In fact, globalization is primarily a normalization as well as an acceleration of an old and singular contradiction: massive concentration of economic, cultural, military, and political power in the core regions while simultaneously deepening the exclusion, deprivation, and social disintegration in vast zones of the Global South. One telling pointer to this great divide is the nature of urban living: about six percent of the city populations in the Global North live in slums; the comparative estimate for countries of the South is estimated to be more than 78 percent and growing.³ Even in the highly celebrated “dynamic and developing societies,” such as the PRC, Turkey, Vietnam, India, Brazil, and South Korea, slum populations are staggering and expanding. For countries like Bangladesh, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Peru, slum dwellers constitute as many as two-thirds of the total urbanites. From this angle, then, the evidence illustrates a move towards both vertical and sharp intra/inter disparities, and explosive horizontal differences that can only be effectively addressed by re-centering the *problematique* of development—one that has a long history of lopsidedness and continues to be, as always, at once local and global.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, Alain Badiou writes, was supposed to signal the advent of the single world of freedom and democracy. Twenty years later, it is clear that the world’s wall has simply shifted: instead of separating East and West it now divides the rich capitalist North from the poor and devastated South. New walls are being constructed all over the world: between Palestinians and Israelis, between Mexico and the United States, between Africa and Spanish enclaves, between the pleasures of wealth and desires of the poor, whether they be peasants in villages or urban dwellers in *favelas*, *banlieues*, estates, hostels, squats and shantytowns. The price of the supposed unified world of capital is the brutal division of human existence into regions separated by police dogs, bureaucratic controls, naval patrols, barbed wire and expulsions. The ‘problem of immigration’ is, in reality, the fact that the conditions faced by workers from other countries provide living proof that—in human terms—the ‘unified world’ of globalization is a sham.⁴

The struggle for a viable material as well as ecological, cultural, and political existence is a common human challenge. This is the fun-

damental and universal meaning of development—an interpretation drastically different from that which construes development as “Westernization.” In other words, despite the fact that nations, as separate historic entities, occupy hierarchical positions in the structure of the “world-system,” the signs of acute social vulnerabilities are visible in all. A main distinguishing feature, however, is the degree of misery in the South in comparison to the North. For Badiou and other critical thinkers, development connotes the building up of the security, resourcefulness, self-confidence, and sustaining institutions of the weakest segments of each society and zone of the world. What the task entails is testified by this monumental and sobering fact: in the early 1960s, the top five percent of the world’s wealthy had an income thirty times greater than that of their equivalent percentage among the poor. By the beginning of the 21st-century, that difference skyrocketed to a factor of 114. Operationally, steps to successfully engage development across a wide range of societies will have to include the expansion of individual freedoms, as Amartya Sen has taught us,⁵ but also a thorough rethinking of the complex intersections of the citizen, the community, the state, the market, and the world order. In the end, then, an attempt to empower human beings to overcome hunger, disease, and lack of education, and, thus, reset the scales of power relations and privilege, will probably continue to bear the marks of, in Walter Benjamin’s arresting phrase, those “left hook” blows that have always delivered a decent chance for modified, if not radically transformed, life-worlds.

This edition of the annual Macalester International Roundtable is set to explore various interpenetrations of the millennial burden of development and the forces of globalization. Specifically, our discussions revolve around these questions:

- What is development?
- What does the concept mean in various regions of the world?
- Is development compatible with globalization?

We start the conversation with the keynote address by **James C. Scott**. In addition to offering other instructive insights, he reminds us of the often forgotten point that social science (like art and poetry),

confronted with humble facts from quotidian life, gives to universals a local name and, hence, offers us *new* revelations.

The next discussion is led by **Ravi Kanbur**. He stresses that experience usually modifies consciousness and reasoning. This happens particularly when one pays attention to the value of adherence to judicious discernment within a highly contested economic terrain. **Colin Hottman '09** responds by identifying “immigration and state failure” as two crucial factors that ought to be integrated into cogitations upon the topic and policy prescriptions that follow. **Amy Damon** stresses, among others, the importance of the “internal transformation” of “development agencies” to such an extent that it moves the power of decision-making to those who are receiving assistance.

Michael Watts' energetic essay leads the third session of the Roundtable. He offers a frightening clairvoyance from the bowels of grim zones of the world—a reminder of what Italo Calvino called, “the inferno of living that is already here.” **Christine Chung '09** proposes a number of important questions that arise from the essay, including this crucial and durable one: who makes the decisions with regard to what resources are used, where, when, and how? She asserts that “development is an act of translation; an act that is centered on the interaction between the subject and the power apparatus, and neither can exist without the other.” **William Moseley** asks about the ways in which oil as a resource affects not only monocultural economies but also countries such as the United States. Moseley asserts that the linkages between environmental and social damage are, to a large extent, attributable to our “addiction to oil.”

The autumn 2009 annual Macalester International Roundtable is upon us. Our theme will be “**Global Environment: The Eleventh Hour?**”

Notes

1. William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006); and Jean-Pierre Chauffour, *The Power of Freedom: Uniting Human Rights and Development* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2009).
2. Compare the above view to the following reference to the concrete conditions in the core, particularly the United States:

The chronic ‘crisis’ of health care in advanced capitalist societies is Adam’s [Smith] fallacy in microcosm. As questions of life and death come to carry a bigger and bigger price tag, how do we reconcile our moral sympathy and solidarity with

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other people's suffering to the implacable logic of money and the commodity? Neither Hayek's revolutionary principled liberalism nor Keynes's expedient pragmatism is likely to provide a final resolution of these dilemmas.

Duncan K. Foley, *Adam's Fallacy: A Guide to Economic Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 227.

3. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006); and Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2004). Also, note this:

...half the world's trade and more than half of global investments benefit just twenty-two countries that accommodate a mere 14 percent of the world's population, whereas the forty-nine poorest countries, inhabited by 11 percent of the world population receive them but one-half of 1 percent of the global product—an amount just about equal to the combined income of the three wealthiest men on the planet. Ninety percent of the total wealth of the planet remains in the hands of just 1 percent of the planet's inhabitants... . Tanzania earns 2.2 billion dollars a year, which it divides among 25 million inhabitants. The Goldman Sachs Bank earned 2.6 billion dollars a year, which is then divided 161 stockholders.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 248–249.

4. Alain Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," *New Left Review* 49, no. 38 (2008).

5. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).