

State of Civil Society at the Millennium/CIVICUS
March 1999

COMING APART,
COMING TOGETHER
Globalization and
Civil Society

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3

ARE WE BECOMING A MORE CIVIC WORLD WITH globalization? Has rapid globalization made us more or less caring for each other and the things around us? Where is globalization headed? Is humanity any less troubled and more hopeful of the future now than before? Is humanity coming apart or coming together? What can we do as citizens, wherever and however we are located and live our everyday lives? Can we take hold of the accelerating race to progress and help shape this heady process in ways that best serve our common humanity?

To be civic means to be more caring for the next-door and distant others, to demonstrate not only in word but more so in action that every soul on this planet counts and has a dignified place on the table. A more caring world is yet to be, and certainly not the description of the century about to end. And whether and how we can make this dream of a more civic world a lived and perceived reality might well be the single biggest challenge in the century about to begin.

Much attention is now focused on the civics—here simply defined as citizens and civil society organizations of high civic-mindedness and civic initiative—for the kind of leadership role they have been playing and can continue to play in building a more civic world in the midst of high-speed globalization. The civics are everywhere—in state, corporate and social organizations—trying their best to secure and promote the common good under enormous pressures coming from all directions. They share with governments a common concern for how best societies should be organized and governed. They mirror the diversity and freedom of the market forces minus the latter's bent toward destructive competition that tends to push things out of control. Civics are not the saint some of us paint them to be. They are in fact less civil than civic at times and not entirely free from bad practices, even moral pollution. Still and all things considered, they probably are one of humanity's best hopes for building healthy civil societies in a fast globalizing world.

A millennium party of one

By October 1999 we shall welcome the six billionth member of the human family in time for a grand millennium party. Imagine if we, whatever the B.C./A.D. calendar means to us, were as one global civil society celebrating the year 2000. The question is whether people are in the mood or have the means and energy for such a rare celebration. The world is in turmoil. Gloom, doom, uncertainty will probably be the most apt description of the mood at millennium's end. Three years ago things seemed more certain. Not anymore. Everywhere people are busy securing their lives against the effects of a pervasive crisis situation. We also have not figured out the full impact of the Y2K bug. The greater part of humanity would be unsure what blessings to count and what to expect tomorrow. Already many have been thrown back to the basics of survival. Russia and Indonesia are threatening to fall apart. China and Brazil are under severe stress. Japan, the second wealthiest nation, is stagnating and cannot figure its way out of the impasse. Dark clouds hang over Europe. The miracle economies of Southeast Asia are miracle no more. Countries big and small are hurting and struggling to keep their societies whole.

For much of the world the party's over by July 1997. This moment will be remembered as a watershed. The crisis which began as a mere money problem in Thailand has spread like wildfire no power on earth seems able to contain. The phenomenon is imaged in colorful metaphors—a meltdown, a financial Titanic, a contagion, a bubonic plague, a wrecking ball. What otherwise would have been a localized



crisis has quickly reached worldwide proportion and now threatens the global system itself.

But some are luckier than most others. The current global crisis is unique in that there seems to be only one winner—the US—and the rest are losers or deeply scarred. In his January 1999 state of the union address President Clinton proudly spoke of the exiting century as the American century and predicted that the next one would be American too. True enough, the 20th century began with the US emerging on top of falling empires, proceeded with the US presiding dominantly over much of what transpired and is now ending with the US standing alone. Topping the superlative, TIME claimed that the world owes so much to America, in particular to the three wise men and financial heavyweights—Alan Greenspan, Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers—who compose what the magazine called all-American committee to save the world.

At millennium's end only one nation has enough reason to party. The US cannot be forever blessed, especially as many societies around it suffer, but it will probably remain standing should there be a global crash tomorrow. With all the blessings of prosperity and power the US is by far the most stable society although it has its own share of social divides and burdens within. Following the financial meltdown it got most of the money in circulation to buy what it wants at a bargain and to continue financing its high consumption. It is home to a comparatively small population comfortably settled in a living space whose abundant natural endowments have been largely preserved at the expense of others. It has monopolized the greater part of the world's resources and energy and got all the modern technology to continue expropriating the carrying capacity of this planet, even stretch its pursuits to the moon. It has the most sophisticated communications technology to project the American dream, values, tastes, lifestyle and whatnot anywhere, the symbols of good life even the proud Chinese would be hard put to resist. And anytime it chooses to throw its weight around it can count on its possession of the most powerful weapons of mass destruction, so powerful as to reduce this world to smithereens. Name it, America has it.

The rest of us will have to keep body and soul together while a few might still have the spirit to toast and kiss at New Year's eve. It makes one wonder where globalization has taken us.



Creating a one-world

Considering the current crisis globalization is a strong candidate for a straw figure to be made to account for everything that went wrong. But it would be foolhardy to blame all our present miseries and troubles on globalization. By the same token we cannot attribute to globalization all the good things resulting from greater openness and interdependence among nations, societies and peoples. Like many things in life globalization has many sides to it. Positively, it may simply be taken to mean as a process of overcoming barriers to the free movement of goods, people and ideas.

The temptation to retreat and to be more wary about further opening up is strong. Indication enough is the growing appreciation of the protectionist measures undertaken by Malaysia, China and to a certain extent Chile. But disappointment with globalization could be stretched beyond mere retreat to the 'safety' of one's borders. Already some angry nations have been agitating for a kind of stonewalling that glorifies narrow nationalism. To demonize globalization is just as wrongheaded as the pre-1997 tendency to hold it up as though it were God's gift to humanity.

Globalization has been with us for much of modern times, perhaps even much longer. It is a continuing human story of how otherwise isolated and distant societies get connected or divided by a host of driving forces beyond the control of ordinary citizens and their institutions. Erstwhile settled societies come into contact with one another in the course of satisfying their basic need for food, clothing, shelter and whatever it is they value in life. In this sense it is a process as old as human existence itself. Long before the birth of settled societies 10,000 years ago people had been roaming the globe in search of food and better climes. Our great, great ancestors appeared to lead out of necessity a 'global' lifestyle as restless nomads until they invented agriculture and learned to settle down.

Fixing the beginning of globalization can be tricky. We can mark it from the rise of ancient civilizations in China, India, Middle East, Africa, Meso America. Or from the time of the earliest empires whose dominions spanned continents. Tracing the spread of great religions can also give some useful insights about how diverse races and cultures had come to be bound by a common faith. Transborder wars and conflicts, a dominant feature of much of human history, have also globalizing elements in them. The demand for resources, energy, new knowledge has also driven the human species to the farthest, highest and deepest reaches of this planet, and even farther on into the outer space.



The history we are talking about may be long or short depending on our reference point. Two million years from the origin of the human species is certainly too long. Ten thousand years ago when agricultural societies first emerged is also long enough. Two thousand years from the birth of Christ seems like ages as well. But think for a moment in terms of lifetimes or generations of say 20-30 years when a parent would reproduce a parent replacement. Then our 10,000 years is only about 400 generations, our last two millennia only about 80 parent lifetimes.

One other way of imaging our history, a favorite among environmentalists, is the 24-hour metaphor. If we take the whole span of human existence as the cycle then the so-called civilization beginning with the invention of agriculture and the emergence of settled societies 10,000 years ago would only cover the last three or four minutes on our clock. If we use the same 24-hour metaphor on this 10,000-year old civilization then the industrial age of scientific inventions starting around the middle of the 18th century involves only the last 35 minutes.

It is just amazing how the world was made much, much smaller in just a brief span of time. In a succession of 200 parents we have gone from the Stone Age to the space age, from using fire to cook our food to inventing the nuclear bomb to burn the entire planet. In 80 generations we have gone from using the donkey, a mode of transport of Christ's parents, to using the car as a high point in personal mobility. In the same span of time we have shifted from the cart to the car, to the locomotive, to the ocean liner, to the supersonic jets in order to move goods and people around the world. We have given up on the postman on horseback for the handy cell phone to reach a friend ten thousand miles away. We can now beam a uniform message through cable television to reach 100 million people at one-go in an instant. In 20 generations we have gone from using the galleon to circumnavigate the globe to sending the first spaceship to the moon.

More to our metaphors. In the last 35 minutes of our 24-hour clock we have been using coal, oil, natural gas, metals and minerals as though they come from bottomless pits and with little or no regard at all to the fact that these fossil materials cannot be renewed nor replaced in our lifetimes. We have mined the forests, the deep oceans and have caused countless plants and animals to disappear beyond recovery. In the same brief span of time we have poisoned the air we breathe, the water we drink, the soil that gives us food. In the last two minutes of our 24-hour clock we have waged two world wars against each other with devastating human and ecological costs without parallel in all of



human history. In the last few seconds we have seen how gazillions of money can be moved around the world, in and out of national economies, at a mere tap on the computer key. We have just seen how one collapsing economy can push the world economy on the verge of collapse.

Modern society as we know it is no older than 20 generations. Probably younger if we count from the transition of natural order society to civil society during the Enlightenment period, around early second half of this century. Indeed much younger even if dated from the beginning of the industrial age around 1750. This modern civil society is a creation of the industrial age that is vastly different from all civilization that preceded it. We can see this difference in two areas at least— one, in the process of wealth creation and, two, in the growth of our numbers.

Much of prior history is quiet existence in the sense of basic changes taking a long, long time to happen. Societies were settled in areas so far apart from each other in a vast landscape such that one knew nothing about what's happening on the other side. Periods of transition from stone to metal to the steam engine took long intervals. Back then it was too hard to live and too easy to die. In contrast modern society runs on high gear and quick acceleration. Transitions come in rapid and shortening doubling time, as what happened from the invention of the steam engine to the discovery of electricity and nuclear fission to our present digital world. Our great ancestors walked long distances for days on end to reach the next community, today's car riders and jet setters take only a few hours to get to the next city destination in another country. These great grandparents of ours were much too tied to their settled lives while we now have a John Glenn making a return trip to outer space. Today's science and technology has enabled us to live longer lives, even to tinker with life by modifying our natural genetic make-up.

Modern society has transformed beyond recognition what was there once only in its natural, pristine form. Precious little has remained untouched and beyond the reach of human activity. It seems virtually nothing will remain forever unknowable and impossible to the modern humans driven by an obsession to grow and acquire more. It took all of human existence till 1900 for the world economy to grow to a size valued at \$600 billion. It now grows by more than this amount in just two years. On average, the additional economic output in each of the last four decades has equaled the total output from the beginning of civilization until 1950. Within this century the global economy has increased 20 times, and nearly five times since 1950 from \$4 trillion to about \$20 trillion.



Like the global economy world population has also been growing exponentially. It took 2 million years, until 1825, for the world population to reach one billion. Our second billion was added after 100 years, the third billion in 35 years (1925-1960), the fourth billion in 15 years (1960-1975), the fifth billion in 12 years (1975-late 1980s). We will hit 6 billion by October 1999. In the next twenty-five years our numbers shall have grown between a low projection of 8.1 billion and a high of 11.6 billion.

We are a modern society of six billion men, women, children thinking, believing and doing different things. We are 6 billion people interacting with each other and with our surroundings in a million different ways. These interactions result in diverse outcomes both intended and unintended to make our modern history.

We want to make sense of the complex modern society such as we have now. We want to understand why things happened the way they did. We want to know who did the changing and how. We want to understand the philosophy and values behind the action, what forms of institutions and means of organizing were devised to bring about the changes. We look back to our past because we want to understand what people who lived before us did to make our world of today, to learn from what they did as we make our present world which in turn will be our future children's history and their starting point for creating their own story.

Building a civic world

The day will come when every village, town, city and country on this planet will be safer, healthier, more egalitarian, more sustainable. These villages, towns, cities and countries shall become models of sharing and caring, of equal opportunity and inclusive participation, of a kind of living that is worthy of human dignity and is attuned to nature's limits. People, goods, ideas shall be free to move anywhere. No hell below us, above us only skies. Though we may still be different people of different colors believing, thinking, doing different things this diversity merely gives richness to our lives; these dividing lines don't exist as in when we are telescoping our planet from outer space. Come that day the world will live as one.

All this sounds pretty much like an impossible dream, like what is suggested in John Lennon's song *Imagine* and the song *Age of Aquarius* by the Fifth Dimension. Quite a number of songs, poetry and prose echo the same message. Daily around the world this message gets projected through the radio and MTVs and other forms of modern communication. The message they convey continues and never fails to



get sympathy of millions wherever they may be. It might not be too much to say that this is *the* common message shared universally.

Just try contrasting this vision with the scenario drawn up by Marx and Engels in their *Communist Manifesto* of 1848.

“Modern industry has established the world market. All old-established national industries have been destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that work up raw material drawn from the remotest zones, industries whose products are consumed, not only at home but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the product of distant lands and climes. All fixed, fast-frozen relations are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face, with sober senses, his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.”

Forget for a moment that these stirring words were penned by communists. But take note that the words of these authors had been taken as marching orders by more than half of humanity, and so seriously as to dare reorganize and rebuild their societies around those ideals no matter the cost and consequences. Forget about who actually said those words, you might think you heard the World Bank president Wolfensohn or some bankers and economists at the last Davos World Economic Forum saying something similar.

Or take the wrecking ball metaphor of the most successful money game player of all time, George Soros. In his latest book, *The Crisis of Global Capitalism*, Soros zeroed in on what he calls market fundamentalism as underlying the current world turmoil. Market fundamentalism is the wrecking ball that has knocked down one country after another in the recent Asian and global crisis. To George Soros, capitalism need not look elsewhere for the causes of our present troubles. The problem is within capitalism itself, which is market fundamentalism. Glorified with a ring of religious faith to it this belief says that market forces left to their own devices and allowed to move freely without any fetters will make this world the best ever place to live in. There will be occasional imbalances all right, but eventually things will end up in a state of equilibrium even with no one interfering. It is a belief that attributes all virtues to the market and mostly evils to the state. George Soros is no communist, in fact he admits openly to being a staunch opponent of Soviet communism and any form of totalitarianism. Soros is a profound believer in Karl Popper's concept of open society. He is convinced that



no one can ever be in possession of the ultimate truth, that the world we have is an imperfect one and cannot be made perfect. Soros asserts that runaway capitalism as symbolized by the behavior of market fundamentalists will put all our strivings toward an open society and a stable one-world economy in grave peril.

The process of globalization has brought us within touching or wrecking distance of each other, literally and figuratively. Setting aside for the moment the horrible stories that attended this process we now have before us a modern world that has more than enough accumulated wealth to sustain us even if we work less hours and spend longer time for leisure. We have more than enough to feed, to clothe, to house, to educate, lengthen the life, expand the freedom of movement and choices of every man, woman and child now living and yet to be born. We can use this accumulated wealth to pay back social dues and start off the greatest ever social leveling process. And probably there will be more left to clean up the mess we have caused our environment.

Or we can just let go through the motion and live our lives as usual. We can just watch things take their own course and leave the wrecking ball be. If nothing else, the current crisis should be a wake-up call. It should make us realize how so tightly connected we are, how a minor glitz in one part could trigger a breakdown in the whole system. Like it or not, and for good or ill, the world in our hand has become so small that we cannot avoid each other. We live in this closely interconnected world where we have just seen how a country like Russia that does not trade with Latin America and is located on the other side of the globe could crash and bring down Latin America, if not the whole world.

The civilized world has come this far, and still remains divided. The civic world is yet to be. We may not have enough time to build it. The writing on the wall at the end of 2,000 years is so clear and compelling. We can hang on to each other like brother to brother, like sister to sister or we will all go down together. There is no individual way out of our present mess. We can and must come together or be torn apart and perish together.

In building a civic world the first tall order is to change our thinking and value system. But what sort of thinking and values must change? We are talking here of modern society or societies of 6 billion people believing, thinking, valuing, doing different things. True, but some ideas and judgments came out much stronger than most others and they happened to be the most crucial in guiding and shaping human actions. The dominant institutions that we see today have been built around



them. Until they are questioned and changed it will be development-as-usual come the third millennium.

The ways of thought underlying modern society and the collective as well as individual behavior of its citizens have their origins in Western thought that were shaped about 20, or less, generations ago. The key figures were French philosopher Descartes and British physicist Newton. This essay makes no pretense about understanding the scope, depth and complexity of their ideas and their consequences. For our purposes here, caricatures and metaphors may do.

Cartesian thought is doubting everything existing, including the existence of the questioner. The logical end of this endless questioning is reduction of what is being questioned to its ultimate particle. Think about the cosmos and begin untangling it into composite solar systems, these solar systems into separate worlds, and each world into its smaller constituent parts, and each part into its minutest particle, till you hit the atom. But this atom is not the end, it has to be split further till we hit real dead end where fission can go no farther. This analytical way of thinking gave birth to complex mathematical formulas based on which we can explain anything, from the amoeba to the solar system. Thanks to Rene Descartes for his analytics, humanity has a method to explain everything. The problem is, this mode of thought has deconstructed everything and we are at a loss how to put back the parts together. For his part, Newton gave us the laws of mechanical motion, the perpetual dynamic of causes and effects. Around his physics was built the modern machine that grows endlessly and now behaves like Soros' wrecking ball.

These two European philosopher-scientists laid the foundation for the scientific revolution that created the modern world. They may not be responsible for everything that happened to our lives, for there had been just too many actors that contributed to the outcomes. But their influence has dominated most others and continues to dominate to this day. We are not about to give up on analysis or mechanics, they are still very much needed. But the ways of thought represented by these two great men of the 16th century cannot continue to be the ways of thought to guide human action in the 21st century. They were suited for the era of endless growth that brought us unparalleled prosperity alongside equally unprecedented but terrible consequences to our society and our environment.

We need a philosophy and science of fusion, as it were, to survive and create a one-world without exclusion. We need a worldview and method that will enable us to bring more solidarity in our divided world, more



sharing and caring instead of cold-blooded scientism and destructive competition. We need a philosophy of life that will make us more sensitive and caring for the things around us, for things that sustain our lives through to the next generations. The new world we are trying to build needs a fundamentally different consciousness, though its features are still being debated and its shape still evolving. However it is fashioned, this new consciousness should enable us to learn to live together despite our extreme diversity, it should be able to help us build a global society where everyone has a dignified place on the table. This new consciousness should be able to steer us into actions that help to restore our depleted and polluted environs.

Our modern world has been built around the prince or the merchant, or both. The first is symbol of the state, the second economic enterprise. Both made good use of the ideas of philosophers, scientists, the economists, the academics, the technical specialists to construct and run the institutions of governance and the economy. They may be some cuts above the rest of us but they are just like you and me with the same genetic make-up, the same basic needs but maybe different desires. They are just lucky to be favored by the convergence of factors and events, for being in the right place at the right time. We, ordinary mortals, have judged them from varying standards as either great successes or miserable failures. They had their day.

The prince and the merchant have a place in creating a civic world. But they cannot continue to dominate and run things the way they did in the past. Change they must, and in ways that are worthy of the citizens of a new world. They have the means and the institutions which if reformed can enable a faster, less bloody and more civilized transition to a civic world.

So far the crowning achievement of the prince has been the establishment of the United Nations. This is the only global institution that can approximate global civil society. But the UN itself is under siege. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights which proclaims the basic rights and freedoms of peoples (note, not nations) has been more honored in breach than compliance. Many times the UN has proven too helpless to prevent the occurrence of things that divide us, to stop powerful or stubborn nations from pushing their weight around and call them to account for their uncivilized behavior. On many occasions it could not even carry out its own resolutions or sanction those who would constrain their implementation. If the UN is our metaphor of one-world it certainly falls too short of the mark. Still it is the only common platform which can provide the most inclusive space for the



voices and concerns of all the citizens of today's world. But if its most powerful members continue to behave as they have been doing, the UN would be a drag in the process of building a civic one-world.

Judged as even more wanting than the prince, the merchant has even more reforming to do. Though the new consciousness is already beginning to rub off on him (business leaders like politicians are mostly men), the merchant is hardly in a position to reverse the tide of self-destruction of the world created in the image of capital. Driven by the bottomline and an obsession to acquire more he will always lead us to a situation where there are only few winners and so many losers. He is a slave to destructive competition which one can win only by continuously externalizing nature and marginalizing human labor. The merchant who has some concern for a more civil and civic world will have to realize that there are limits to growth. He must be able to demonstrate in action that business activity, in order to succeed, need not discount people and our future. And that internalizing social and ecological costs also makes good economic sense in the long run.

There are civic princes and civic merchants too, and their numbers are slowly but steadily growing. This is nothing strange. Goodwill and humanity may be found in strange quarters and are not a monopoly of so-called NGOs and other civil society organizations.

Civic people can be found and can develop anywhere—in government, in business circles, in the local community, in all social institutions. They are the people who believe that the way toward a new civic one-world, though rocky, entails inclusive participation, gender equality, redistributive justice, civic initiative, concern for the common good, solidarity and caring. They are the promoters of a new consciousness and civic action needed for the new millennium. They understand why paying our social and ecological dues now and not later will make for a sustainable society that is vastly different from what we have now.

Civics as citizens, prominent or ordinary people, like you and me, have come a long way from the time of Plato's exclusive city. They were the opposing voices to the monarchs and popes during the Enlightenment, the leading advocates of the emerging civil society of that time. They were the opponents of the prince who caused wars and sent men (lately women, too) to the frontlines. They were the activists behind the most powerful social movements of modern times. They were the alternative voices of the 1960s who dared think and do anything the Establishment did not want, from marijuana to anti-war mass demonstrations. They were the voices of citizen participation in an era when decisions affecting



our everyday lives at home, in the neighborhood, in the workplace, in schools, churches and parks were nearly monopolized by the prince and the merchant.

These new citizens are yesterday's and today's alternative voices celebrating and shaping the coming new age through their songs and poetry, through voluntary association and communal living, through caring and sharing for each other. They are the derring-do's who lay their lives on the line to bring down dictators and corrupt governments, to stop companies from further hurting our already degraded environment. They are the leading social activists challenging distant and highly-centralized institutions of power in order to restore sovereignty in the hands of ordinary people.

Fast backward to the future

If we look back to the first settled societies or the more recent enlightened feudal societies in the middle ages when there was less created wealth but more caring, our modern society is way, way beyond recognition. The process of creating a one-world, particularly during the last decade, seems to be leading nowhere near that goal. Rather, globalization is leading us to where no sane person wants to be—to the brink of global collapse.

This amazing process has been presided over mostly by the prince and the merchant, whether civic-minded or uncivilized. And look at what they and the so-called globalization process have made of us—a world more divided, more insecure. They had their chance and blew it, so to say.

The clock must be turned backward, and fast. There is no time to lose, the wrecking ball is upon us wreaking havoc everywhere like nothing we have seen before. Governments cannot lead, they are lost and almost completely helpless, they can only do crisis management at best. The corporations are resigned to fatalism because they are trapped in the hole of market fundamentalism.

But we have the civics with us to show us the way out—fast backward—to a more secure common future. Civics are a bunch of activist idealists in great hurry. They are in great hurry to put a stop at runaway, negative globalization. More, everything they think and do is intended to derail and reverse such a destructive process. Civics are a driving factor for a creative disintegration of the present system. They want to build smaller worlds—small defensible spaces where everyone will have a better



chance to participate and exercise self-determination—and on this basis create a united world. Their shortcomings, their insolence and impatience are of little consequence to what they want our world to be.

With these modern or postmodern citizens we have a fighting chance to do a radical turnaround. With them we will be able to learn faster to live together, to come together before the wrecking ball succeeds in tearing our world apart.

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