INTRODUCTION

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The impulse to launch this collective writing project came in the waning years of the 20th century, that convergence of vivid psychological and historical moments which were seemingly constitutive of the spirit, if not the substance, of a radically different social order in most human communities the world over. Indeed, purveyors of the usual fin de siecle portents of disaster and decadence had little difficulty showing the concatenation of "evidence" of truly global pro-portions. William Butler Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" and in particular its line: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" was never so widely quoted —at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, which seemed in so many ways eager to ratify the poet's vision. Unconventional energies were being unleashed, not always in a physical sense, and not always in a positive manner, and it was hard to tell in what direction they were headed. Even as more tolerant attitudes vis-à-vis gender, ethnic and ideological differences were developing across regions and borders, old nationalisms and religious tensions were being rekindled in all continents. For the informed observer, little imagination was needed to divine that a more complex (not to say superior) stage of social relations had indeed been attained over virtually the entire planet. "Global disorder" might as well be the term to designate this stage of human evolution; the adjective is as significant as the noun it qualifies.

Globalization both simplifies the world community into a compact unit—a market unit—and complicates, fragments and disrupts human relations in it. It is the very complication of these arrangements which forces one to reexamine the premises of *progress* as the developed world apprehends it. New technolo-gies create new modes of conviviality, even as the anonymity and openness inherent in the Internet encourage the rise of the hacker phenomenon; thus hackers may very well be the Luddites of the new era, minus the class-struggle motivation. Is the antisocial, anti-industrial society Unabomber really such an isolated case in overmechanized Western communities? Cell phones, those ubiquitous presences in most Asian urban areas, represent an extension of the individual's personal freedom, but they also serve to dramatize in a more os-tentatious way than does the computer the gap between the "haves" and the

"have-nots" of modernizing societies. The freedom of both individual and minority dissenters is being curtailed by insecure State bureaucracies in Burma, China, Vietnam, at the same time as the international media are finding ever larger spaces of freedom to operate therein. But how long can Internet access to the outside world, and the threat to totalitarian power that it represents, be prevented by the State? On the other hand, how long will the Internet resist its tendency to become more a vehicle for commercial transactions or for mindless "entertainment" and less for the communication of information that it was originally meant to be?

Ever since the early 1990s the discourse of liberal-democracy has prevailed the world over, less because of an innate practical superiority than because of the failures of its ideological rivals to generate a counter-response in a time of a proliferation of emancipating technologies. Yet nagging questions continue to be posed about the ethical limits of personal freedom in liberal regimes, above all when chiefs of state (as in the US and in the Philippines in the 1990s) could so casually cross the line which was supposed to divide private from public modes of behavior; for conservative Americans, most agonizing of all interrogations was the extent of the damage which their erring president allegedly wrought on the moral leadership of the world's sole superpower. In the end, a general sense of well-being and prosperity served to "absolve" Bill Clinton in the eyes of his countrymen, and the swift passing of time—itself an impression perhaps created by endless proofs of technological prowess—helped to heal the real or imagined wounds thereby inflicted on American hegemony.

That these disabused reflections occupied the mind of the literate, well-informed citizen of virtually every national community on earth at century's end is conceivable. At the other end of the spectrum, it may be argued that the marginalized and uninformed majority of humanity felt no overwhelming need to ponder the larger significance of the new world order taking shape before their very eyes. Yet even the excluded majority were affected by the dynamic of globalization, in their respective capacities as producers and/or consumers of commodities and services of the borderless market economy dominating the world. In the last quarter of the 20th century China, India and Indonesia, holding

within their respective national borders more than half of the earth's population, acquired even greater global importance—for the sheer geopolitical weight they jointly represented, of course, but even more so for the political effects that their respective national policies of economic liberalization were projected to have on the Asian, nay international plane. The wealth to be created, needs to be satisfied, new middle classes to be nurtured, material desires to be homogenized, political values to be redirected—Westward, think some—this vast international agenda for the "end of ideology" seems to be less and less utopian at the start of the 21st century, thanks to the new technologies.

But is the perspective of a massive Westernization of Asian societies all that inevitable? For one familiar with the mainstream (Christian, lowlander, more or less English-speaking) Filipino experience in the 20th century, it would be tempting to answer in the affirmative. But this was an isolated experience to begin with, the "success" of which had to do with the Philippines' having been directly colonized, twice in its history by major Western powers. This country also has the distinguishing feature as one of the oldest civil societies in Asia, which may be reasonably explained in terms of its elite's exposure to commercial and cultural trends from the West. In any event, Filipinos have generally shown little sympathy for authoritarian and much less totalitarian modes of governance; they put a dramatic end to more than thirteen years of martial law in February 1986—significantly enough, at the same time as the foundations of the Soviet empire were starting to erode with Mikhail Gorbachev's gamble to push perestroika and glasnost to their logical ends. With that reaffirmation of their "traditional" affinity with freedom and democracy, the Filipinos showed, not for the first time, how different their cherished commitments were from those of most of their Asian neighbors. Their reprise of people power, culminating in the ouster of the incumbent president on 20 January 2001, was significant for two things: it was another demonstration of their preference for as direct a democracy as possible on the one hand, and it highlighted the mobilizing potential of electronic technology—cell phones for spreading text messages—on the other. The televised impeachment trial preceding the exit of Joseph Estrada was still another means whereby audiovisual technology heightened a sense of national community and primed the citizenry for instant action. It is no exaggeration to say that the Philippine experience over the late

20th century period has functioned as one huge societal laboratory for the verification of certain hypothetical claims in favor of liberal democracy.

WHETHER THE Filipinos' engagement with these ideals could translate into prosperity and social progress still remains to be seen in the post-EDSA era. Lee Kwan Yew, an unrepentant disciplinarian, in 1993 disparaged their optimistic discourse thus: "I don't see any of the Asian countries wanting to copy your gridlock system… The one Asian country, namely the Philippines, that modeled itself on America has become a negative example."[1] During the debate that raged across the Pacific in the 1990s about so-called Asian values, the Singaporean statesman, joined by Malaysian prime minister Mohamad Mahathir and several other prominent Asian personalities, defiantly took an illiberal position, confident in the economic and technological superiority that their respective societies had attained in a matter of just a decade or two. In the early years of the Philippine republic, the polity had reached its limits of political permissiveness, only for its citizens to realize by the 1980s that their nation-state had fallen far behind in the race for material development. In contrast, their neighbors in East and Southeast Asia were striving, by all standards successfully, to prove that in a non-Western setting, economic reform must take place first before political reform. This viewpoint needs to be grounded in the specific political cultures of the region. It is true that undemocratic Asian regimes cannot long continue to coexist with the emancipatory communications and information technologies which, not so paradoxically, some of them are promoting. But the problematic of culture-specific collectivism and anti-individualism remains an indispensable starting point for any serious study of whatever material advance that Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and, to a certain extent, India have registered in the past half century. On the other hand, and lest the Filipinos forget, it was their preferred version of liberal democracy which made the informal, congenial and amoral Joseph Estrada brand of national leadership possible.

In the popular Western imaginary, traditional Asian societies (or Communist regimes for that matter) function and reproduce themselves according to a habitus of social regimentation, inhibition of self-expression and an omnipresent State machinery. Whether valid or not, this concept of "Oriental despotism" has

long been consigned to the museum of ancient myths by the objective workings of a manifold process having to do with the passage from the precapitalist stage of history to the next, a process which, for simplicity's sake, we call modern- ization. As one can observe from the trajectory of several Asian national com- munities in very recent times, without modernization, there can be no civil society; without the latter, there is little space for spontaneous diversity, for minorities' entitlements, for the individual's right to reassert/reinvent his/her self. The fact that human rights movements, environmental-protection networks, and a host of other advocacy-oriented nongovernmental organizations are making their appearance in developing countries only in the past few decades is both a validation of the theory of uneven development and a manifestation of an aroused longing for those spheres of autonomy which characterize mature de- mocracies and serve to stabilize social order therein.

It is also true that Western governments and philanthropic foundations have realized that in the Third World, civil society can be created "from above," and from scratch as it were, by the simple expedient of funding NGOs (which does not mean that NGOs alone constitute civil society). Thus has the neoliberal agenda recuperated the civic essence of local self-help initiatives, which by definition used to be carried out without external funding and definitely without government intervention. Globalization, after all, also aims at the worldwide integration of all civic efforts into the liberal-democratic project. This is as much as to say that civil society and the market are closely linked, contrary to a thesis dear to certain leftists. It is quite unfair to accuse globalization, as an editorial of a prestigious French publication has done, of having "a secret ambition," namely "the destruction of the collective and the appropriation of public and social spheres by the market and the private sector," allegedly in order to "build a society where the individual will finally be privatized."[2] The rapid communi- cation of ideas made possible by globalization is precisely correlative with the adoption of the collective ethic in women's or ethnic and sexual minorities', etc. movements. If globalization has a positive aspect at all, it is its promotion— unintentional, admittedly—of the spirit of social capital, defined as the ability of people to work together for common purposes in groups and organizations.[3] Autarky may be appealing when considered in the abstract; in the real world, however, the internal and external isolation which is its concomitant lays the grounds for dictatorship. In this connection, let us note that it is the rare NGO

which does not participate in a globalizing discourse: NGO militants operate in an ideological framework where international cooperation and solidarity are *de rigueur*.

ULTIMATELY, BORDERLESS parameters also imply borderless concerns. The East-West, or if one prefers the North-South, divide is never far below the surface of the globalization debate, where the "invisible hand" is rightly or wrongly associated with Western notions of progress. For example, global warming had replaced nuclear Armageddon as a more plausible threat for mankind in the late 20th century. At the same time, the overheating phenomenon serves as a reminder that the overdeveloped societies, Eastern and Western alike, still set the pace of a "progress" that spells comfort for some but environmental damage for many more. This is not to say that rich economies alone are to blame for air and water pollution; the point is that all technological progress has been achieved at a heavy price. On a less physically threatening level, the danger which computer viruses represent for state bureaucracies and corporate empires has not abated; indeed, it would appear that the endless parade of hi-tech software on the market has only whetted the appetite of "war freaks" for boundless destruction, but a destruction no longer limited to science fiction. In a similar vein, one may cite the fantastic speed—and impunity—with which huge amounts of money may be transferred out of defenseless national territories, thanks to the same technology. Lastly, the phenomenal spread of American pop culture on a planetary scale may have its stimulating aspect— the painless, nay pleasurable, transmission of the message of personal/political freedom for young and old, men and women in societies which have known little else but repression[4]—but its hegemony is difficult to separate from the tendency it encourages towards such mindless homogenization, in music, food, clothing and even linguistic preferences, as to provoke a xenophobic or nativist backlash in the underdeveloped societies where it manifests itself. Is there one sector in this almost completely globalized world, then, where the South is at least figuratively taking its revenge on the North? Yes: the drug trade (poetic justice, Chinese who remember the Opium Wars might say); it is a trade which immediately conjures images of decadence, profits, corruption and crime; but also one that is impossible to pursue on a global scale without the benefit of communications, transportation and even weapons technology.

In a prosperous and overdeveloped society, the individualist ethos is more than likely to engender hedonistic lifestyles, true enough, but one would be hard put to imagine how Western man would have reinvented the world without a healthy dose of individualism. Beyond the dominion of ideological and religious received knowledge, there is a space of freedom within which individual curiosity, daring or plain self-interest may produce benefit for the common good (often unintentionally, as Adam Smith would pontificate). Even the principled retreat of the individual from mass society, which Thoreau exemplified, is capable of enriching the discourse of civilization. The problem is that "individualism" has come to be so identified with the West as to constitute its universally-accepted attribute, while the Oriental construct has had to assume, in a largely defensive mode, an ascribed "collectivism" which is constantly being undermined by market forces and forces of liberal democracy. But we can note that in so many Asian countries, the State-enforced collectivist idea is on the way out, replaced by self-help initiatives on the individual or community level which are accompanied by a larger sense of political freedom. For its part, the debate on so-called Asian values will not entirely die out—postcolonial and gender studies will always have their opinion on the matter—but these values will be disarticulated from their repressive content, leaving an "irreducible" core of less controversial traits like hard work, thrift and valorization of education. (Will they then still be exclusively Asian?) Western moralists will continue to be confronted by their Asian counterparts, but with less acrimony all around as the protagonists come to realize the futility of these polemics. Already the more crucial battles against disease and hunger are being judged by their results, and less by their simple good intentions. In the open-ended age of postmodernist, globalized sensibilities, pragmatic approaches are more than a stance; they are a necessity.

IT IS SURELY not a coincidence that the supposed End of History should also usher in the newer shibboleths, "politics of meaning" and "communitarianism." But it is not as if the Western world were unaware of the societal consequences of the realization of a lack of a viable working alternative to liberal-democratic praxis. The ascendancy of individualism, self-interest and "me-firstism" was such in the US in the early 1990s, according to a journal influential among American intellectuals, that it

provoked a healthy reaction in the form of a "new paradigm," namely an

> emphasis on solidarity, mutual aid, social responsibility and a sense that
> we are all in it together and that we must take care of each other as if
> we were all part of the same family.[5]

The communitarian ideal thus proposes to achieve, in a non-authoritarian manner, what the Marxist model could not. But on the international plane, how could solidarity, mutual aid and these other high-minded ideals be made compatible with the economic ravages that globalization brought in its wake? Could America and the rest of the North be made to temper their Schumpeterian destructiveness through mere verbal reminders to be gentler and more caring? Does the "new paradigm" take nationalism, which is a form of solidarity, etc., but which objectively runs counter to the essence of globalization, into account? At the turn of the century, anti-IMF and World Bank riots regularly broke out in Seattle, Prague, Davos and other havens of free-market consensus where the architects of globalization met, with the protesters conveying the message that these questions would stubbornly remain posed well into the new era.

All sorts of contradictions have been thrown up, then, by globalization's disruptive effects on long-embedded sociopolitical bonds, obligations, habits and traditions. It is not surprising that in their contemplation of this "runaway world" (Anthony Gidden's phrase), social scientists and other public intellectuals have found renewed signs, either of impending catastrophe or of the much-vaunted Age of Aquarius. Primarily written for a Filipino general public (but in hopes of stimulating discussion elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond), this collection of essays represents a modest contribution to the debate. All of them present the globalizing process, as it has so far unfolded in this part of the world, as an *exacerbation* of the identitarian, sexual, ethnic, cultural and ideological tensions which have accompanied the evolution of ordinary human beings as they negotiate their rights and entitlements not only with each other, but with the often impersonal and disembodied powers which dominate their existential landscape. Significantly, these essays focus on the micro or, if one prefers, the ground level of globalization: the concern is for the worker, the migrant, the peasant; the exercise of power at the State level is only marginally discussed, if at all. At the same time, the importance of the State as force for

reform is not discounted; it is simply that individuals the world over feel deprivation, injustice and alienation more spontaneously than formal bureaucracies do.

It is probably a matter of indifference for the majority of humanity that the famous End of History may be in sight, or is actually here at last. But if "going global" is the only manner by which Asian societies can attain this imaginary destination, we may—ironically enough—be in for a renewed engagement with History.

Notes

1. Interview in *TIME*, 14 June 1993. Similar sentiments but without express reference to the Philippines are expressed by Mohammad Mahathir and Shintaro Ishihara in *The Voice of Asia* (Tokyo, 1995).

2. Ignacio Ramonet, "Pour changer le monde" in *Maniere de Voir* no. 5, Juillet-Aout 2000. Ramonet is also the editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

3. The sociologist James Coleman's definition, quoted in Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: the Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (1995).

4. For a round-table discussion on the American cooptation of the ideologico-political message of this "universalizing culture," see the special issue on "Pop Culture, Images and Issues," in the USIS publication *Dialogue*, no. 99 (1/93).

5. Michael Lerner, "Clinton's Economic Crusade: the Missing Ingredient," *Tikkun*, March-April 1993, p.8 Lerner is the editor of this journal.