

Culture, Human Rights, and the Politics of Resentment in the Era of Globalization

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Globalization, Capitalism, and Westernization

In 1938 the German-Jewish diarist Victor Klemperer wrote, “Curious: At the very moment modern technology annuls all frontiers and distances, (flying, radio, television, economic interdependence) the most extreme nationalism is raging.”¹ This quotation from 65 years ago encapsulates much of the current perception of globalization and its pitfalls. If one were to substitute the world “e-mail” for “radio” one would be describing the new closeness that seems to be affecting many people in the world today. At the same time many fear the effects of globalization. Does it bring people together, eroding cultural misunderstandings and social distance, thereby increasing the likelihood of compassionate humanitarian empathy across previous national and social boundaries? Or, on the contrary, does it result in increased anger of the poor against the rich, of the marginalized against those who are central to the world economy? Will such anger take the form of increased resentment, scapegoating the “West” and “Westerners” for a host of economic and social ills? This essay discusses how globalization intensifies the politics of resentment. It proposes in broad terms some measures that might reduce the level of resentment, especially in so far as globalization is connected with the spread of “Western” human rights.

A standard definition of globalization is “a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding.”² More compactly, globalization is often referred to as the compression of space and time. This definition suggests benign implications. If space and time are indeed compressed, then surely communication among all parts of the world will be enhanced and understanding likewise.

Perhaps a more realistic definition of globalization focuses on its central economic aspect; that is, global capitalism. Capitalism is now taking over the entire world. Socialism as an economic system is either dead or completely discredited. Only a few marginal states such as Burma, North Korea, and Cuba

still cling to the socialist myth, to the extreme economic detriment of their citizens. Capitalism is the only economic game in town.

World capitalism is often equated with Westernization, a takeover not only of the economics but also of the cultures and ways of life of the “non-Western” world. This is not surprising. The institutions of world capitalism are still largely controlled by Western powers and Western-owned transnational enterprises, even as corporations from some non-Western countries, most notably from Asia, enter the powerful central capitalist bloc. Under the onslaught of such all-encompassing Westernization, protection of indigenous ways of life seems even more unlikely in the twenty-first century than in the period of colonialism or in the half-century that followed the colonial era. Freed from the direct cultural imperialism of the past, non-Western states now face cultural diffusion—the strong cultural attractions of the West that their citizens voluntarily adopt. These attractions are extremely difficult to control in the new era of global communications. In the hundreds of millions if not billions, citizens individually choose to adopt or emulate Western consumer goods, Western symbols, and the Western way of life. Clothing, eating habits, music, and film all seem now to emanate from the West. While the “culturally fearful,” to use Amartya Sen’s phrase, fear cultural subversion, others accept that globalization means consumption of American products and ideas.³

Human rights appear to be part of this general cultural emanation from the West. Like the desire for other aspects of Western culture, the desire for human rights cannot be controlled by governments. Cultural changes are not necessarily consequences of cultural imperialism; they are often consequences of cultural choice. Only a complete closing off of all borders can slow down the process of cultural Westernization, including the demand for more individual human rights. Yet despite this profound cultural adoption of the desire for human rights, for the last twenty years the international community has debated whether human rights should be universal, or whether they are actually a Western idea, whose adoption by non-Western countries would constitute a further erosion of their culture than has already occurred. My own position on this debate is that human rights are universal in principle, and ought to be in practice. To some non-Western commentators, however, tired as they are of well-meaning Westerners telling them how they should organize their societies, human rights are a form of cultural assault. As Bilahari Kausikan argues, “[T]he Western approach [to human rights] is ideological, not empirical. The West needs its myths; missionary zeal to whip the heathen along the path of righteousness and remake the world in its own image is deeply engrained in Western (especially American) political culture.”⁴ Human rights are seen as a cultural construct peculiar to the West, and irrelevant elsewhere.

In fact, the “Western” ideal of human rights originally began at the time of consolidation of the nation-state in Europe, and somewhat later the consolidation of capitalism. These political and economic changes were accompanied

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by new notions of the individual's proper relations to the family and society and by new notions of the individual rights a person should enjoy against political, and later economic, authorities. These "Western" forms of political, economic and social organization have now spread all over the world, therefore necessitating changes in all societies toward individual human rights. National governments' attempts to ward off these worldwide political changes usually result in disaster. So also, disaster would result from any national government's attempt to withdraw from the process of globalization, rather than negotiate some influence over it.

To Richard Falk, globalization is a "predatory" takeover of the globe by neo-liberal capitalism. In this view, globalization is a zero-sum game, which human actors, namely Western leaders, have invented for their own benefit. There is much evidence of the detrimental effects of globalization.⁵ There is also evidence that non-Westerner as well as Western capitalists are involved in globalization.⁶ Globalization is not necessarily predatory, however. Falk concedes that globalization "could have occurred and might still be redirected under a variety of ideational auspices other than neo-liberalism."⁷ Nor is the spread of global capitalism a direct result of human agency. It is not a Western "plot."⁸ But it is easier for those fearful of globalization to scapegoat international institutions such as the World Trade Organization—especially to scapegoat them as "Western"—than to think about how economic growth and development, and the occasional and contingent accompaniment of these phenomena by democracy and human rights, actually occur.

If we accept globalization for what it is; not only, or even chiefly, the compression of time and space, but more concretely the final triumph of capitalism as a world economic system, then we can ask ourselves again the old question about cultural relativism. Will globalization change the need for human rights? Will it reverse or modify the social changes in the non-Western world that have resulted in nation-states whose economic system is characterized by the pursuit of private interest and whose social system is characterized by increasing individual disengagement from family, village, and community? Or will it intensify these social changes? The answer is obvious: all these social changes are intensified by the forces of global economics, global culture, and global communication. The question, rather, is whether globalization will help people to attain their human rights in a peaceful, democratic manner? Or, in despair at the rapidity and confusion of social change and the consequent economic insecurity that many suffer, will the reaction against the West intensify?

The optimistic scenario predicts that via the creation of wealth (via rational capitalism), and the accompanying spread of democracy and human rights, many or all non-Western societies will eventually attain the prosperous economic status and free political system of the West. The pessimistic scenario is that misery and impoverishment will deepen, as indigenous peoples lose their lands; peasants are forced into privatized property relations; cities become

overcrowded; and masses of men, women and children work for wages so low they sometimes do not even provide for basic subsistence. In the former scenario, the non-Western world will gradually shed its culturalist objections to human rights, recognizing that in a prosperous economy, non-Western societies can simultaneously enjoy individual human rights and enjoy their own indigenous cultures, as they see fit. In the pessimistic scenario, there will be intensified resentment of the West, seen as responsible for globalization and cultural imperialism. Globalization will result in rising political conflict and religious fundamentalism, and in political unrest, civil wars, and general repression worldwide.

In reality, globalization is likely to have both results. In the very long term, the final spread of global capitalism may well result in a modernized, wealthier world. There is a large literature showing the long-run tendency of capitalist development to coincide with democracy and to improve human rights.⁹ In the short run, globalization is likely to have many disruptive and impoverishing effects as world economies adjust to new markets in land, labor and capital and as populations previously protected from capitalism are drawn into it. These short-run effects call for even greater vigilance by the world human rights community than heretofore. Economic rights are being eroded and will continue to be so. Peasants and indigenous peoples' property rights are disappearing. The new urban workers are often without any rights to form trade unions or bargain collectively.

But no amount of vigilance by the world human rights community will be adequate protection for those now being incorporated into the global capitalist system. In many parts of the world, working conditions resemble the conditions of the British working class so ably documented by Marx and Engels a century and a half ago.¹⁰ Just as the British working class had to struggle for its rights against profit-seeking manufacturers and against governments dominated by the wealthy, so the working classes in the non-Western world now face this same struggle. On the one hand, they will be assisted by international human rights law and the international human rights movement. On the other hand, some may well see this entire human rights apparatus as completely hypocritical. Those Westerners offering their well-meaning assistance to the victims of globalization seem to be the sisters and brothers of those who exploit them. The hand they offer to those who are drowning appears to belong to the very people who first sabotaged the boat.

Is the ambiguous position of these Western human rights activists so disabling that it is best to retreat, giving space to the non-Western world and non-Western governments to cope as best they can with the intensified social change consequent upon the final spread of global capitalism? My answer is no. We need to understand globalization in order to understand what new human rights problems are likely to emerge in the early part of the new century. Human rights are even more relevant now than they were previously. The nation-state

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may be declining, but capitalism is becoming more deeply entrenched. The social world is changing and Western cultural domination is a real problem. There is a danger of extreme cultural resentment of the West and there is some legitimacy to this resentment. The West should, therefore, try to mitigate this resentment as much as possible by facing up to its own responsibilities for human rights violations, and its own cultural flaws. The principle of universal human rights nevertheless remains.

In what follows I discuss resentment of the West arising from, or justified by, fears of globalization. These are not my own views of globalization or the role of the West in it. This essay is a social scientific analysis of the rhetoric and politics of resentment, especially as it applies to the international movement for human rights. Taking this resentment seriously as a political phenomenon, even if it is not based on a realistic assessment of globalization, I suggest some means to defuse it.

Globalization and the Politics of Resentment

Globalization has four defining characteristics that affect debate on the universality of human rights. These characteristics are the decline in the autonomy of the nation state; the intensified transnational class structure; changing aspects of social life; and weakened national cultural autonomy. All of these aspects run the risk of deepening non-Western resentment of the West, of the “Western” ideal of human rights.

Declining Autonomy of the Nation-State

During the last two centuries, the nation-state has been the chief vehicle for attaining freedom and development, even as it has usually been the chief perpetrator of human rights abuses within its own territory. Yet globalization predicts the nation-state’s declining relevance. States are increasingly relinquishing aspects of their sovereignty to international organizations. This change is propelled in part by the emergence of common values, for example, in the European community. It is also propelled by the increasing authority of sophisticated transnational organizations. Some of these organizations are official, such as United Nations’ regulatory agencies; others are unofficial, such as the many international non-governmental organizations that attempt to influence international public policy. Some analysts also note the emergence of what might become an international “civil society” of pressure groups, even if this so far has tendencies to representation by organizational elites that lack a formal means to identify their constituencies or ascertain their constituents’ views. Such an international civil society suggests also the emergence of an international human rights culture in which the individual assumes world citizenship.

This global integration and evolution of world citizenship suggests the possibility of global liberal politics, in which individual freedom, choice, and tolerance of difference allow a global marketplace of ideas to accompany the emerging global market in products. The liberal ideal which is characteristic of “western” (actually democratic, whether in the West or elsewhere) politics is so attractive that it seems that citizens newly possessed of political rights in so-called “transitional” societies will eventually force all remaining national governments to adopt it. Liberal democracy could become the political norm world wide, validating Francis Fukuyama’s idea of the “end of history,” in the sense that, just as there is now only one economic game—capitalism—in town, so now there is only one ideological game—liberalism.¹¹ Liberalism is the philosophical root and economic buttress of any notion of international human rights.¹²

On the other hand, if liberalism becomes the only legitimate political ideology in town, this could very well be an added inducement to some states to reject human rights as an operative principle of government. Declining international legitimacy of ways other than liberalism of forming a national community—what Ernest Gellner calls an *umma*¹³—could increase the danger of culturalist resentment of the Western world, with a consequent desire to retreat to societies based on illiberal beliefs, as the Hindu nationalist movement in heretofore liberal India exemplifies.¹⁴

The emergence both of international organizations and a nascent international civil society also raises the question of the extent of the human being’s capacity to feel a common sense of citizenship with strangers. To raise to the world level the individual’s formal “universe of obligation,”¹⁵ rather than focusing on smaller, more familiar units where the obligations of communal responsibility are more easily identified, may be to spread too thin the links of the citizens with his fellows.¹⁶ Individuals in such a situation might well prefer to retreat to smaller, more familiar communities. Their national state will define for them a community easier to comprehend than the cosmopolitan, global world. Thus, the likely short-term scenario is that already privileged citizens of Western and/or liberal democracies will continue to enjoy having governments that protect their human rights, while many others will languish in a situation of rightlessness. This is certainly a likely scenario for countries that are simultaneously weakened by the international economy and international politics, and threatened by internal secessionist movements. The ideology of individual human rights may well seem to the governing elites of such countries to reinforce their loss of control, both in international relations and within their own borders.

Globalization does not necessarily imply states’ greater interest in protecting their citizens’ human rights. States will not demonstrate greater interest in, or capacity to protect, human rights without economic growth, without the political liberalization that sometimes accompanies growth, and without the

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rise of internal social movements that will demand rights for their own constituencies. Political transitions in the twenty-first century will not necessarily be to democracies: they may well be to new forms of state terror, authoritarian dictatorships (such as the combination of economic liberalization with old-style communist dictatorship that currently characterizes China), or repressive communal *ummas*. As in the recent past, culturalist arguments of resentment are likely to be used to justify political policies that deny liberalism, democracy, and human rights.

The Intensified Transnational Class Structure

The new global economy is intensifying the transnational nature of class structure. Already in the late twentieth century the world witnessed the development of an international class of business owners and managers sharing a common entrepreneurial culture and increasingly removed from ties to the nation-states of which they happened to be citizens, or in which their firms and businesses were located. Many members of this international business class are migrants from what used to be known as the “Third” to the “First” world, for example, from China or India to the United States. Their skills, knowledge and position in transnational firms remove them from local settings. Perhaps such a transnational business class, tightly knit and anxious to avoid any social or political conditions that might undermine its capacity to make profits, could act as a stabilizing force and a counterweight to any individual nation’s desire to remove itself from the global economic system and the global human rights regime.

In the new transnational class system, however, labor has far less capacity to unite in its own interests than does the propertied and managerial class. The unbalanced nature of the class forces of international capitalism suggests a highly differentiated capacity to adapt to the changing world. To those in the business, governmental or professional elite, ideals of global governance, liberal political economies and individual human rights may seem very attractive supporting their social and cultural adaptation to a global social milieu. To those impoverished by globalization, adaptation to the new environment will be much more difficult. A culture of consumerism and a social world of urban, individualistic competition may merely increase their sense of insecurity.

This problem will be compounded by the fact that while both land ownership and capital are increasingly globalized, labor lags far behind. If free movement of people were to follow free movements of capital and investment, then perhaps there would be some reduction of the rising income disparities between rich and poor countries. Most governments of prosperous nations, however, still control very strictly their immigration and refugee policies, in part because their own workers often object to competition from immigrants. Confinement of the poor—the victims of globalization—to their own borders be-

gins to seem a form of global apartheid.¹⁷ While international agreements protect the right of individuals to claim refugee status in cases of political persecution, they do not permit refugee status in cases of severe economic distress. Even imminent starvation invites only humanitarian assistance, not legal rights to rescue.

In this case, international human rights law seems stacked against those most likely to suffer from the effects of globalization. Human rights seem to stop at breakfast. This is not in fact so: academic evidence shows that breakfast—the economic right to food—depends upon implementation of those civil and political rights that enable citizens to assert their needs and defend their interests against the interests of states and corporations.¹⁸ But this detached analysis is of little comfort to those currently starving. It may, indeed, be seen as even more evidence of the West's lack of interest in actual, starving people. The West's interest may seem instead to be to propagate a political ideology that served it well in earlier centuries, but merely serves to keep others down now. The West's interest in promoting civil and political rights then becomes yet another focus of resentment, easily mobilized by leaders who can find the appropriate rhetoric.

Changing Aspects of Social Life

Marshall McLuhan regarded earlier aspects of the compression of time and space as evidence of the formation of a "global village."¹⁹ Globalization breaks down the last technical barriers among different "worlds," allowing social interaction and understanding among individuals from all parts of the globe. But the notion of global village is inaccurate. Village society is characterized by closeness and familiarity among residents, a thick feeling of community. The emerging international society is not a global village but a global city, with very thin, if not non-existent, community feeling.

Cities generate new types of communities formed by choice, based on social roles rather than family or ascribed ties. For many individuals, the city is a liberating place, where social constraints are loosened and where the obligations one bears are chosen, not ordained by family, kin, or communal group.²⁰ But those individuals who enjoy the city are nevertheless often mere strangers living together in a common space. With very high rates of geographical mobility, thick family or community ties are often lacking. One can choose to make the acquaintance of one's neighbor and assume obligations to him, but one can equally well choose to ignore him. The narrow, filmy layer of commonality symbolized by shared taste in clothes, consumer goods, and mass media is not enough to create new communities of obligation.

The new technology that compresses space and time, while it is often thought to bring people together, equally allows for social withdrawal. Space is not genuinely compressed, nor does the capacity for instant and generalized com-

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munication necessarily result in greater assumptions of social responsibility. Some individuals may assume greater responsibilities to strangers when they are brought psychologically closer to them via television, telephone, or e-mail. Such an assumption of greater responsibility seems to underlie the proliferation of international human rights NGOs during the last twenty years of the twentieth century. Other individuals may simply regard greater access to knowledge about others in remote parts of the globe as a form of entertainment, to be switched off and on at will. The capacity for empathy engendered by actual personal contact among individuals is not generated to the same depth or sensitivity by technological contacts. Cynicism can replace sociality: people are more easily manipulated and used when face-to-face interaction is unnecessary.

A hundred years ago, people worried about the anti-social effects of the telephone: fifty years later, the worry was about the anti-social effects of television. Both of these inventions have, indeed, undermined sociality in Western and non-Western societies. Robert Putnam has demonstrated the stark decline in civic participation and voluntary associations in the United States since the 1960s.²¹ If sympathies are evoked by face-to-face communication, by tales of suffering that one can read on a face as one hears the words recounted,²² then globalization may imply a new stage in that decline of the public that Richard Sennett decried some time ago. Individuals confine themselves to the private sphere, conducting their public life at a greater distance than ever, if indeed engaging in public life at all.²³

On the other hand, there is mounting evidence of the formation of global social movements and transnational non-governmental organizations. These are often populated by sophisticated political actors who know how to use the new global media, and whose points of social reference are defined by interest, not by national boundaries. Yet while this social development reinforces the idea that a class of world citizens is arising, the masses may be even more disconnected from actual contact with decision-makers than previously. The global village begins to look like a global megalopolis, with only a very few citizens involved in decision-making, the rest alienated.

Whether a force for intensified alienation or a force for new global activism, changes in the social world affect those already at risk from globalization. If loss of property and loss of economic security is added to loss of social norms, family, and community, the individual is cast adrift in a sea of uncertainty. Unable economically and educationally to enjoy urban life except, perhaps, at the level of sex, drink, and drugs, many individuals experience a severe loss of bearings. Their own cultures having been rooted in certainty, socially-agreed group norms, and prescribed family roles, they are now victims of the alienation attendant upon loss of role and loss of productive labor. Without access to land, for example, millions of African men find it difficult to marry. Such individuals are often vulnerable to substitutes, whether to cults, magic, or po-

litical demagoguery. They are also vulnerable to cultural retreat. All these new cultural forms may rely in part on myths of Western imperialism and resentment of social changes brought by contact with the West. Yet paradoxically, assertions of cultural particularity or even superiority arise even as national cultures are more severely weakened in the period of globalization than in earlier periods of the spread of capitalism.

Weakened National Cultural Autonomy

Much is made of the new global culture of consumer goods. No matter where one travels, it seems, one can find young people who understand the importance of being seen in the “right” clothes. Even young men in Burma now wear their baseball caps backward.²⁴ To wear the right clothes signals an affinity with global culture, the idea that one could merge easily into Western society, if one only had the luck to get there. But this is a thin culture; it relies on symbols to indicate affinities or preferences, but it does not indicate a deep attachment to an entire complex of values and social norms. Certainly, material symbols of Westernization do not necessarily indicate ties to human rights values, whether “Western” or otherwise.

At the same time, nations or elites trying to preserve their local cultures—or what they believe their local cultures ought to be—resent the incursions of Western materialism. Western clothes, media, and music seem to presage the incursion of all Western values and customs into their societies. We are familiar with the extremist Iranian denunciation of all things Western, and Iran’s censorship of Western films, music and television. The Iranian reaction is typical of many in the non-Western world who do not wish their societies to adopt the materialistic, crime and gun-ridden values that seem to typify American life. As the elder statesman of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, has said: “I find parts of it [America] totally unacceptable: guns, drugs, violent crime, vagrancy, unbecoming behavior in public—in sum the breakdown of civil society. The expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society.”²⁵

At issue here is not the reality of American, Iranian, or Singaporean ways of life. Within the very societies that decry the evils of American culture often lie deep political violence and deeply exploitative sexual practices, often including the tolerated prostitution of young girls and boys. Even homosexuality, thought to be a Western “vice,” is practiced and tolerated in most societies in one form or another.²⁶ But the “West” more broadly and Americans more particularly seem to believe that it is appropriate to bring what any “decent” non-Western person knows belongs to the private sphere into the public eye. Westerners, it seems, have no shame. Americans especially seem incapable of keeping even the most intimate, private aspects of human behavior out of the public realm.

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The culture of global travel also upsets those non-Western countries attempting to preserve their own cultures. The entire globe is now part of tourist territory, vulnerable to the tourist gaze. Rich Western tourists stare at those less rich as objects—exoticized beings who exist to satisfy the tourists' curiosity and sense of excitement. The global tourist culture is also a culture of sexual predation, as Westerners fly to Thailand or Kenya to have sexual relations with young girls or boys. Here, again, it does not matter that, for example, Thai police and government officials actively connive at the sex tourism trade.²⁷ What matters is that powerful and wealthy foreigners are invading local private spaces.

With the onslaught of Western material goods and Western media, it seems that local media are in danger of being completely engulfed. Somehow the media of violence and sex are the overwhelming choices of ordinary citizens. Nor is this importation of Western "decadence" balanced by export of indigenous non-Western cultures to the Western world. While a global culture of music, dance, film, and literature does seem to be emerging, much indigenous culture is filtered or mediated for Western consumption. To those who value creativity, such cultural mixing, and eclectic use by cultural producers of whatever they encounter, might signal a genuine world cultural community. But to those who value purity, eclecticism spells danger. To them mixture is degradation, the conversion into an international consumer good of that which ought to be retained by the culture that produced it. Cultural degradation breeds nationalist resentment and attempts to return to local social purity and self-isolation from global society.

Defusing the Politics of Resentment

The changes described above all seem to threaten non-Western states as they undergo the process of globalization. A weakened nation-state has fewer resources to defend its interests and the social values of its people. The transnational class structure seems to rob the state of the loyalties of many of its most productive members while pushing many of its less fortunate into economic and social degradation. Local social bonds are torn asunder; there is little to replace them. Cultures fall victim to Western exports of immorality.

In this world of increasing uncertainty, the promotion of universal human rights seems to add even further political and social strain. Non-democratic, non-Western states are constantly criticized for adopting forms of political rule that might seem quite sensible to them—or at least, to certain elite members of the society—and told that they should adopt changes to make themselves more Western. With extreme social disorder already evident, they are advised to permit even more in the form of freedom of speech, legal public protests, and legal social movements. With social solidarity declining, they are advised to give rights to women, children, and even homosexuals, eroding further the ties of family and clan structure. With cultures under threat from the forces of

global capitalism, they are also criticized if they do not allow free access to “world” media. Small wonder, then, that the reaction from many governments and from many segments of non-Western societies is severe resentment of what is seen as the Western call for human rights.

It is difficult to determine, nonetheless, how deep this resentment is; certainly it is impossible to determine genuine public opinion on this matter. Perhaps such resentment is mostly a political artifact, propagated as an ideological means of shoring up dictatorial regimes that would disappear immediately if citizens were allowed civil and political rights. Perhaps certain social movements, such as Islamism in Algeria and Egypt, are deeply resentful of the West, but are not representative of local public opinion. Perhaps we have here merely a newer version of the old fear of cosmopolitanism, “the West” now substituting on the international scene for the “cosmopolitan” Jew once so feared in Europe.²⁸ Sudden, severe social change often is accompanied by local reaction, political, religious, or cultural, but the extent to which such reactions actually reflect social feelings on the whole is deeply problematic. Thus, the very term “culture wars” may be an exaggeration of social trends that accompany globalization or Westernization. If the local peasant’s major concern is how much rice his paddies yield, and the local worker’s major concern is whether she can obtain a well-paying job at an American-owned factory, such individuals may have little interest in cultural resentment.

What follows assumes, nevertheless, that cultural resentment is a real social phenomenon; therefore, that culturalist arguments against “Western” human rights are more than merely cynical political manipulations. If there are real cultural resentments, then there is good political reason to try to defuse them. International relations require a commonality of goals and values to facilitate negotiation and the extension of the international rule of law: assertions of severe cultural differences undermine the emergence of these common values. It is also a good idea to try to defuse culturalism as a political tool, in order to focus on more concrete issues of economic programs and political change. Finally, terrorism against the West, based partly on resentment of its values, is no longer merely a threat as it was in the 1990s.²⁹ While war is one way to cope with the terrorist threat, perhaps a more sensible approach is to try to reach some sort of respectful rapprochement with non-Western societies, including those that feel themselves to be victimized by the forces of globalization.

One way to defuse the politics of resentment is to accept some Western responsibility for the disruptive social changes that globalization is now imposing on the non-Western world. This does not mean that local, non-Western actors should be absolved of their own responsibilities. Nor does it mean forgoing the principles of international human rights. But there are ways to bring the “globalized”—the weaker casualties of globalizing forces—into the international debate on human rights and other social values. Below I discuss four practical ways of furthering this goal.

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A More Diverse Multivocal Debate

The debate about the cultural relevance or rootedness of human rights has so far been conducted mainly among members of the political, cultural, and religious elites of various societies. Moreover, it has often been conducted between the West (or Americans) and people claiming to speak for certain regions of the world, such as Africa and Asia. Often, these claimants are paid by—or in fear of—their governments, and are not necessarily saying what they believe. One wonders, for example, about the intellectual independence of Chinese authors in Chinese-Western exchanges on human rights.³⁰ Or, the debate has been conducted between the “West” and certain religions, especially Islam. Again, even allowing for the peculiarity of comparing geographical regions with religions, there are varying interpretations of each religious tradition, some more and some less supportive of the international human rights standards.³¹

A genuinely multivocal debate on human rights would be both vertically and horizontally more diverse. At the vertical level, no longer would members of elites be permitted to speak for “their” societies without challenge from individuals representing other interests, even opposing forces, within those societies. At the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights, the international women’s movement, brilliantly organized by Charlotte Bunch and her colleagues, forced the official delegates to recognize that women’s rights were human rights.³² At the 2001 Durban Conference against racism, members of the despised Dalit caste of India (formerly Untouchables) demanded attention even though the Indian government argued that caste divisions were not racial divisions. Such Dalit activists challenged claims that Hinduism is a culturally-specific way of protecting human rights.³³ Similarly, representatives of minority or oppressed groups from Western countries—such as African or Native-Americans—should also be present and included in both academic and official discussions of the universality of human rights.

The presence of such individuals is important because discussion of abstracted “values,” absent discussion of what these values mean in the social realm, removes human rights from their actual preoccupation. Human rights are concerned with practice: who is killing, torturing, robbing, or starving whom. Discussions of Islamic ways of life rooted in scholarship of fifteenth-century Islamic values,³⁴ or of “Asian” human rights values rooted in classical Confucian thought,³⁵ are as irrelevant to modern-day society as discussions of “Western values” rooted in fifteenth-century Christianity would be. Like must be compared to like, and practice must be compared to practice. Such discussions need to acknowledge the common social conditions and cultural manifestations thereof existing all over the world, such as the global culture of production and exchange and the global culture of urban life.

Debates on the cultural relativism of human rights would do well also to become more horizontally multivocal. Often, discussions take place between governmental, NGO or academic “representatives” of the West, and individuals from one or another non-Western society. If people from the various “non-Western” groups were to speak together, they might find they have much in common. There is much similarity in the claims and complaints by some Islamic, African, Asian, and indigenous spokespersons against what appears to them to be the individualist, rights-asserting culture of the West, as opposed to the communitarian, duty-bearing culture that some prefer. Such multivocal discussions would reduce the tendency to think that different geographical regions actually have radically unique social values, and would focus debate more squarely on where it really belongs, on the difference between more urbanized, developed, and individualized Western societies and the less urbanized, less developed and less individualistic societies that still exist in much of the non-Western world. Such discussion, in turn, might focus debate on the more relevant problems of how to protect human rights while still protecting local cultures in a globalized world being taken over by international capitalism. Discussions should not continue to refer to outdated customs or religious beliefs about the nature of human dignity and social justice which no longer reflect local social norms and ways of life.

Finally, such multivocal debate would recognize that the “non-Western” assertions of cultural autonomy also reflect many concerns within Western society itself about the extent of individualism and withdrawal from social concern. Both social conservatives and social democrats in the West express concerns similar to the preoccupations of those who believe they are articulating specifically Asian, African, Islamic or indigenous points of view. Social conservatives are concerned with social obligation within “traditional” families, but less concerned with broader community social obligation. Social democrats are concerned with obligations to the broader modern community, especially to those many fellow-citizens who are impoverished or marginalized by the forces of capitalism.³⁶ Multivocality would address both the similarities of many non-Western, regionally-based objections to human rights, and the differences among philosophies of social justice within the West itself.

Acknowledgment of the Flaws in Western Culture

Kishore Mahbubani has argued: “Western values do not form a seamless web. Some are good. Some are bad. But one has to stand outside the West to see this clearly.”³⁷ Mahbubani’s assertion that only those standing outside the West can see its flaws clearly is inaccurate. Social individualism and the assertion of rights without consequent obligations is a phenomenon that concerns many in the West.³⁸ The West has devised a social and political system that in

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principle will protect individual human rights. But at the same time, this social and political system does not protect the community and incorporate all its members into the collectivity. In both the United States and Canada, for example, there are severe social problems such as lack of childcare that the non-Western world is justified in wanting to eschew.

Whereas to some non-Western elites the solution to such social problems would be to deny some categories of citizens their rights, the West cannot adopt this approach. The solution to the lack of childcare is not to remove from women the rights they have acquired to work and to divorce, but rather for the society as a whole to adopt national programs of childcare. A dialogue on this matter would also have to stress that men as well as women have a responsibility for the home; cultures that allow men freely to roam while confining women to the domestic sphere are not a model the West wishes to emulate. The solution to the problem of high rates of divorce is more difficult: here an acknowledgment is necessary of the damage a social ethic of extreme individualism has caused to family commitment. It is this ethic of individualism that many non-Western spokespersons fear.

In each case, then, family-based problems need a genuine multivocal discussion, rooted not only in religions or ideologies but also in actual social practice, taking account of social change. The role of Westerners in this discussion is to acknowledge these problems, to discuss how they came about, and to be willing to listen to criticisms from abroad. Such criticisms cannot be discounted as mere conservative reaction. What the West seems to be advocating in human rights discussions is dissolution of some of the most sacred social values of non-Western societies. When that discussion turns to women, children, the elderly and especially homosexuals, it is deeply disturbing to many in the non-Western world. Thus, the discussion needs to take place with respect for all points of view, even for those with which one radically disagrees.

A multivocal approach also needs to be taken to discussion of civil and political rights, such as freedom of speech. The spread of blasphemous, pornographic and scatological speech via the Western media is offensive in many cultures. Yet one man's blasphemy is another man's free speech, as in the case of Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*.³⁹ And what one society sees as pornography another sees as the free expression of sexuality, an essential part of the human person in some cultures' eyes. On the other hand, the inability of a country to protect itself from constant and offensive expressions of pornography, scatology and blasphemy—endangering, in its eyes, essential public morality—is a matter for concern. Again here, Westerners need to be respectful of denunciations of the spread of Western custom and morality. Perhaps introducing to the discussion conservative Western religious leaders—such as leaders of the American Christian right—as well as Western secular liberals would facilitate intercultural understanding. A West not perceived as mono-

lithic by spokespersons of the non-Western world would perhaps lessen the incentive for cultural resentment.

The real topic of this debate, then, needs to be both whether the West can solve its own severe social problems without resorting to violation of individual human rights, and whether non-Western countries can implement individual rights without incurring the same social cost as the West. In the past in the West, most people adhered to their familial and community obligations because they had no choice. Social sanctions; for example, public denunciations of adulterers by village priests, were very strong. Coercive social or legal measures compelled individuals to put the collectivity before themselves.⁴⁰ Now that these social and legal sanctions have disappeared, the problem is how to promote a collectivist ethic based on voluntary social concern for others. Communitarians such as Amitai Etzioni are attempting to promote a more collectivist vision in the United States. Other analysts, including the present author,⁴¹ stress the need to take economic, social and cultural rights far more seriously than does the United States, which is one of the developed world's worst violators of economic rights.⁴² These are issues that commentators like Mahhubani do well to bring to the West's attention: they should be central to any debate on the cultural underpinnings of human rights.

New Forms of Human Rights Monitoring

The West could lessen the incentive to culturalist resentment of its human rights project by engaging in self-monitoring of its own contributions to violations of human rights both in the non-Western world and at home. Some international human rights NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, do pay considerable attention to human rights violations in the Western world, especially North America. Western governments are also well-advised to follow such a self-critical approach. The U.S. Department of State annually monitors human rights violations by every other state in the world. To some in the rest of the world, this annual criticism is merely an assertion of American power, not reflecting any genuine concern for human rights. A genuine concern would impel discussion of the United States' own blatant internal human rights violations, such as the lack of a national health care policy⁴³ and the racially-biased practice of capital punishment. America has a responsibility to set its own house in order and acknowledge its own human rights flaws, before criticizing others so strongly. Similarly, Canada lacks a constitutional right to food, and one in every hundred of its children suffered from malnutrition in 1994, a shocking number for so rich a country.⁴⁴

Canada does not publicly monitor other states, but like the United States it also takes account of their human rights performance in its foreign policy and its disbursements of foreign aid. Here again, non-Western critics might point to Canada's responsibility to subject itself, its corporations and its private citi-

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zens to human rights monitoring. For example, investment in Sudan by the Calgary-based oil company, Talisman, generated great controversy in 1999 and 2000. A report commissioned by the Canadian government concluded that the Sudanese government was using Talisman's airstrip for military purposes; that oil revenue from Talisman would help the government finance its participation in the long-standing civil war; and that Sudanese citizens were being forcibly displaced because of concerns about oil-field security.⁴⁵ Yet the Canadian government decided that it would not ban Talisman's investments.

Aside from self-monitoring, routine monitoring by other countries of Western human rights violations might be a useful antidote to perceived Western human rights arrogance. In 2000, China released its latest report on human rights in the United States.⁴⁶ It might be argued that monitoring of the United States by China is simply an act of political hypocrisy, given China's own human rights record, but it could also be argued that American monitoring of China is equally hypocritical. For the rest of the non-Western world, to observe China issue a report on the United States is to bring some balance to human rights discussions. This might help to reduce the sense of cultural insult that non-Western societies frequently feel when their human rights performances are discussed by more powerful Western outsiders.

*Acknowledgment, Apology, and Reconciliation*⁴⁷

Many human rights activists are now debating whether Western countries or citizens should acknowledge responsibility for past human rights violations they perpetrated in the rest of the world, and perhaps even issue some selective apologies.⁴⁸ Indeed, the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights urged such acknowledgment in August 2001, just prior to the Durban Conference.⁴⁹ Without some form of acknowledgment of collective Western responsibility not only for the crisis-ridden post-colonial period, but also for the emerging social problems in areas now being disrupted by global capitalism, human rights advocates may seem to be increasingly archaic remnants of Western imperialism. Acknowledgment and apology might result in some reconciliation between Western and non-Western actors in the human rights debate, lowering the level of rhetoric and focusing more on real needs for human rights protection.

In the last fifteen years, much attention has been paid to attempts to reconcile formerly competing ethnic groups, races or political groups in various societies through forms of truth commissions.⁵⁰ Another reconciliatory measure is the idea of a formal apology. For example, in 1988 the Prime Minister of Canada, speaking on behalf of Parliament, made a formal apology to Canadians of Japanese descent who had been interned during WWII.⁵¹ Ten years later, the Government of Canada apologized to its indigenous peoples for its

past maltreatment of them.⁵² Non-governmental organizations can also issue apologies. In March 2000 Pope John Paul II apologized on behalf of all Christendom for its treatment of Jews, women, and indigenous peoples.⁵³ Finally, representatives of States can apologize both for harms done to other States, and harm against their own citizens. President Clinton apologized to the people of Guatemala in 1999 for past U.S. support of military rule.⁵⁴ During visits to Africa both President Clinton and President George W. Bush acknowledged the harm of slavery and the slave trade, though neither apologized for the American role in the slave trade, or American enslavement of people kidnapped from Africa.⁵⁵

Perhaps, then, the time has come for Western governments more generally to consider whether they owe an apology to the non-Western world. Such apologies would have to address a number of questions, not least for what exactly the West, as a collective entity, is responsible. At minimum, such an apology might be offered by States that engaged in the African slave trade, by former colonial powers, and by countries that sent settlers to take over land previously occupied by indigenous non-Western peoples. At maximum, some people in the non-West would want an apology for everything from the West that has ever affected them, up to the present moment. Some might consider that an apology warrants financial compensation, while others would think not. And others would despair of the hypocrisy in, for example, Clinton's apology for not taking action during the Rwanda genocide, when his own government had refused to recognize that genocide was taking place, for fear of consequent pressure to intervene.⁵⁶

Such an enormous task as an apology sounds far-fetched. But the West's unwillingness to acknowledge what it has done to other societies seems to weigh heavily on many people from non-Western countries engaged in cultural dialogues with representatives of Western government, academia, and other elites. For such critics, it is easy for the West to preach the value of human rights. Human rights can be more easily protected when a country is wealthy than when it is poor, and much of Western wealth, they believe, was accumulated by exploitation of the non-Western world.⁵⁷ At issue here is not how the West actually developed, but the perception that capitalism has always been the result of "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force," as Marx so eloquently put it.⁵⁸

Acknowledgment and apology might overcome in some small measure the misperception among many non-Westerners that Western human rights advocates are constantly presenting the West as a morally superior place. Acknowledgment by the West of its own responsibilities might result in a small measure of reconciliation between the two worlds. Perhaps after such acknowledgment and apologies are made, the international cultural discussion of human rights can move down from the rhetorical plane to a plane dedicated more concretely to the everyday human rights needs of all people everywhere.

The Future as the Past

This essay opened with a quotation from the German-Jewish diarist Victor Klemperer noting the simultaneous emergence in the 1930s of technological progress and extreme nationalism. All periods of technological change induce dreams of a better future for the human race, even as they simultaneously cause disruptions in the everyday lives of millions, now billions, of people. The current period of globalization again induces such dreaming. Perhaps the revolutions in travel and communications will bring the world closer together, fostering a shared thirst for democracy, community, and human rights. Perhaps instead, the social changes that globalization impels will result in more fear, more resentment of the rich West by the “Others” left behind in the race to wealth, prosperity and peaceful lives.

Unable to predict the future, the West would do well to temper with a little modesty its criticisms of those parts of the world that do not live up to its human rights standards. This does not mean abandoning those standards. Nor does it mean abandoning historical objectivity, or absolving local States and elites of their own considerable responsibilities for human rights abuses in their own societies. It does mean acknowledging the history of the formation of those states, the history of disruption of those societies, and the responsibilities of the West in creating the non-Western world that exists today. And it means that the West needs to put its own house in order.

The politics of resentment has in the past resulted in murders and tortures, ethnic cleansing, even genocide. The cosmopolitan human rights elite is a threat to those political leaders who use the politics of resentment to shape and control their own societies in their own interests. As globalization spreads the ideals of human rights and allows more and more contact between activists and those who need their rights protected, so we need to guard against inducing unnecessary resentment from those who would divert the human rights community from its enormous task.

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