

AN ETHICAL ASSESSMENT OF GLOBALIZATION

SERGIO BERNAL RESTREPO

The Christian response to the challenges posed by history requires a careful discernment, an attitude that is quite contrary to the usual trend, rather common in certain Catholic circles, to demolish anything that represents a novelty.

Globalization offers us a good opportunity to practice discernment as an attitude – not a methodology – in order to take advantage of the great resources offered by progress, trying to reduce the negative effects it produces on people, well aware of the fact that human realities are a mixture of good and evil as a result of sin.

My claim is that the type of assessment we make of globalization depends on the perspective from which we see it. Christians, being loyal to the Gospel, must see reality from the standpoint of the poor. This has been the basic message that Catholic Social Thought has tried to convey since Leo XIII as John Paul II has stated in *Centesimus annus* (11).

However, even among Christians this position is not easily accepted, and this is an attitude that should question the sense of our allegiances. Paul VI in *Octogesima adveniens* pointed out with a deep insight, that often times we are so strongly determined by mental structures and material interests, even more, that we experience so deeply our class and cultural solidarity, that we end up accepting without restriction values and options of the social context (cf. OA 50).

Catholic Social Doctrine has often been criticized even by some Catholics because of its ‘ignorance’ in economic matters as well as for its emphasis on distribution of wealth, ignoring, as these critics claim, that, in order to distribute it is necessary to produce. Credit in this regard has been given only to John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, granting him a minimum of economic wisdom, although we have to

admit that not all readings of this document do justice to the message the Pope is trying to transmit.

The ethical appeal of the social encyclicals has not always been rightly understood. For this reason it is interesting to realize that, in the face of the globalising process in which the economy has taken the lead, evidence seems to lead us to conclude that there are solid grounds for this concern of the Catholic Church which, analyzing real situations, insists on the need to redistribute wealth with equity. As a matter of fact the prevailing economic model has produced an enormous amount of goods, services, and financial resources. However, the question remains: who benefits from those resources? Is there an invisible hand that assures its equitable distribution?

Evidence seems to contradict the claim that liberal democracy combined with the free market contributes more than any other system to the realization of a just and equitable society. In the US, according to the Census Bureau, between 1967 and 1997 the average income per family showed an interesting behavior. The lower 20% saw an increase from seven to nine thousand dollars. For the second 20% the increase went from twenty to twenty two thousand. The third 20% grew from thirty one to thirty seven thousand dollars. In the same period, the top 20% could enjoy an increase that rose from 126 to two hundred and fifteen thousand dollars. The wages of dependent workers suffered a decrease of 12% between 1973 and 1998 while, in the same period, the salaries of high executives increased by 535%.

Employment as a means to develop the vocation of man and woman to fulfill oneself through work represents another challenge in today's world to the point that to some observers unemployment is not simply a problem, but rather a serious pathology whose solution cannot be found so that we will have to learn to cope with it trying to reduce its ill effects to a minimum (Off Claus, 'Towards a New Equilibrium of Citizen's Rights and Economic Resources' in *Societal Cohesion and the Globalising Economy*. Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris, 1997, 81-106). The problem is due, at least partially, to the fact that work is losing its capacity to be an instrument for the distribution of wealth and a guarantee of social equity.

If we accept work as a fundamental and inalienable right of the person it becomes quite evident that the present situation of growing unemployment and the trend to render work more 'flexible' is quite unethical. In fact the so called 'flexibility' is covering the problems of unemployment

and under employment which generate a great deal of insecurity and economic need.

It is worth noticing that, as long as the globalization process advances under its present form, the ethical concern gradually grows. A good example of this trend is the concept of development adopted by the UNDP, a concept that has been clarified in recent years with a clear humanistic and ethical connotation. Development is no longer assessed according to the growth of GNP alone, instead a greater relevance is given to the human person thus introducing new indicators such as political participation, the respect and promotion of women's rights, the access to public services, the impact of consumerism on personal growth, among others.

In a way this ethical concern is the outcome of the need to solve the apparent contradiction between the efficiency of growth and human costs. Is it right to impose on the lowest strata of society the high cost of structural adjustment which, at least in the short run benefits the higher strata that possess the capabilities to face the situations created by the demands coming from external pressure? Michel Camdessus has declared that he conceives structural adjustment as the struggle against the structures of sin embodied in corruption, nepotism, excessive bureaucratization, and protectionism together with other phenomena that hinder economic growth for the benefit of the entire population.

However the problem remains unsolved. Camdessus is right in proposing this goal, but he seems to ignore the human problem that lies behind statistics. Independent organizations, such as those of the UN and the World Bank have demonstrated that, contrary to what some try to make believe, the most serious problem in today's world is the poverty that affects more than one billion people that have to survive with less than one dollar per day.

Joe R. Feagan, President of the American Sociological Association in his Presidential Address has challenged sociology to return to the origins placing social justice at the center of its concern ('Social Justice and Sociology. Agendas For The Twenty First Century' in *American Sociological Review*, February 2001, 1-20). Feagan's proposal is the result of his reflection on the reality described by scholars interested in development and on this subject he quotes the words of a famous North American Sociologist, W.B.B. Du Bois who wrote in 1968: 'Today political discussion is difficult; elections are not free and fair... The greatest power in the land is not thought or ethics, but wealth. Present profit is valued higher than future need'.

It is interesting, but at the same time a reason for concern, to read research on globalization that often times is loaded with ideology which leads towards quite different ways of interpreting statistics. Some conclude to the need of putting an end to the process, while others exercise their imagination in order to demonstrate its high values stating, for instance, that the few pennies that a poor person can win make him or her happier than millions of dollars that the rich person can add to his or her abundant income. In their opinion this is an argument to demonstrate that globalization does not generate poverty. Here we can see once again how futile is the claim for a value free science. Scientists should rather declare their *Weltanschauung* and values in fair honesty.

Globalization is basically an issue of means and ends, of goals and strategies. What should be the goals and strategies of society and what principles should guide these choices? As Prof. Crocker has rightly stated we move in an interdisciplinary domain where theoretical and practical elements mingle in various ways. If we consider ethics as an expression of the search for happiness we will be able to formulate desirable futures in an endeavor which does not start from utopia, but from the consideration of existing trends in today's society with a projection towards the future with a particular conception of the person.

This exercise raises a question that many dear not ask about the model of development and the life styles of the rich nations and whether this is the model to be proposed and even imposed on the whole of humanity. The question is politically incorrect because of the many interests involved in the issue. The Pope gives us a good example ignoring the risks as he invites us to analyze models and life styles critically and freely. Can we accept without restrictions a model that risks doing irreversible damage to the environment? Is this model sustainable, not only from the point of view of economics, but also regarding the environment, culture and human welfare? Does it correspond to a Christian vision of the person, of the world and of the relations between the two?

But coming back to the original question and staying away from demonizations we should try to avoid the temptation to condemn the market as such. As the Pope states with a sense of reality, no other system has been found so far that could serve the need to distribute wealth. However we cannot indulge in the opposite extreme of being taken by an ideology that has made of the market an absolute end reducing everything to merchandise, including human beings. It is an illusion to speak of the market in pure economic terms ignoring its ethical and cultural components. We

could accept with restrictions a market economy, but we cannot accept a market society. The market is not enough. Institutions are required that render a service to political freedom and social justice (cf. 'Towards a Global Open Society' in *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1998, p. 24).

Camdessus accepts the role of the invisible hand provided it is coupled to the stretched hand of solidarity and that of justice, that is, accompanied by the regulating power of the State that may guarantee that the benefits of globalization arrive to all those who at present are excluded from the process. This is, of course, a moderate vision of the new conception of the invisible hand, quite different from the opinion of those who hold that human nature, the almost unlimited desire to possess greater resources, to increase one's wealth, to have everyday something more than the neighbors next door, and even to leave them behind are the motivations that keep the economy going (cf. Robert Wright, 'Nonzero. The Logic of Human Destiny', Pantheon Books, 2000).

In the same manner it is not possible, nor even desirable to stop globalization. Again, this does not mean that we have to accept it unconditionally and much less make of it an ideology seeing it as an end in itself. The discourse about governance is, after all, no other than a call to ethical reflection. It is not enough to create institutions that may harness globalization. It is necessary to orient the process in function of human happiness conceived within the ethical parameters of integral well-being. Happiness does not consist only in the possibility to participate in the economic benefits of progress, nor should it be a selfish enjoyment and even less the success of a tiny minority which is hoarding wealth in a way that is not acceptable. There seems to be enough evidence to demonstrate that the zero sum exists and that the accumulation of wealth by a few hinders the access to the benefits of economic growth. The claim that globalization in its present form is generating poverty is no longer a slogan. Camdessus admits that globalization is not man's destiny, but he claims that the future of humanity follows this direction in a trend toward a long-term unification of mankind. Seen this way globalization constitutes a fantastic opportunity for all the people on earth to work together towards the goal of common prosperity.

Assuming that the person is the parameter in a Christian analysis of development in a world in which the boundaries between economics and politic disappear, a number of issues require a serious study. Is there only one model of democracy valid for all Nations regardless of cultural diversity? What does participation really mean? What are the rights of citizenship

in a society that accepts exclusion as a natural component of an inevitable process? Should the rights of the citizen include participation and information regarding decisions that have an impact on their lives? If we accept the ballot as an indicator of democratic participation, what lies there behind the decrease in voting which is assuming a worldwide character?

An effort must be made to reverse the trend giving back to politics its proper role as the search for the universal common good. The State should recover its role as the institution that should guarantee the rights of all, especially of minorities. The responsibility of Christian citizens is enormous since it is their duty as voters and administrators of the public domain, which has assumed world dimensions, to apply the principles, criteria and lines of action proposed by Catholic Social Doctrine. Today's state of affairs demands from the Hierarchy acceptance and respect for the mission and autonomy of the laity. Lay men and women have the right to demand from their pastors the necessary orientation along the lines of formation, not of imposition so that citizens may assume their roles as free and responsible persons.

Closely related with the issue of democracy in a cultural context that has dismissed traditional Christian values is the felt need to search for an ethic of minimal basic values which is the result of consensus. Of course, to the obvious risk of relativism we must add the problem of democracy where the reality is that a minority ends up imposing its will on a powerless majority (cf. RH, 17). The situation becomes worse and worrying if we consider the trend to eliminate the weak members of society together with those that may be seen as a burden for the powerful. What is the real motivation behind the struggle to legitimate euthanasia in Western societies where the burden of supporting an ever-increasing number of retired people will fall on the shoulders of a reduced working force? The problem is that consensus cannot be reached about these issues that are at the core of the future of humanity. The ecology is a good example of this case. In fact, the consensus reached in an international Conference can be erased by the withdrawal of one single nation that holds the monopoly of power in the world.

The trend towards cultural homologation is eliciting an interesting reaction which, sometimes could end up in some form of fundamentalism. Is it right to think global and act local as a principle for action? This is another challenge that demands a great deal of discernment. Traditional cultures could be enriched while enriching others if a true dialog is established. This presupposes, however, mutual respect as well as a deep knowledge of what each partner in dialog can offer to the other.

The examples we have analyzed so far raise the question about how to evaluate a system in which the economic value dominates life in society. Here we can see that Mr. Camndessus' good wishes do not grasp the reality of greed, embedded in structures that could be created and which is at the origin of corruption, nepotism and other forms of illicit creation of wealth stimulated through publicity with the promise of a sort of happiness brought about by possession and accumulation. Is it right to allow the big TNC lead the direction of biotechnological research? What is the role of the State, and how autonomous are States regarding economic and cultural policies originated at the great centers of decision making? Here, again, the principle of subsidiarity acquires new relevance.

The reform of International Organizations is an urgent issue for they could ideally be the answer to the demand for governance. Unfortunately nothing is less democratic or less open to participation than those institutions in which one single vote has a greater weight than that of the majority. The ethical appeal is an appeal to an authentic liberation of persons and societies alienated by an ideology whose sole value is profit at any cost, leaving no room to horizontal nor vertical transcendence of the person.

Discernment of reality must open the way to solidarity in all its possible forms. I believe that a reading of reality with its great benefits and evident limitations from an ethical perspective confirms the validity of the appeal to the globalization of solidarity.