

REPORT ON THE AFTERNOON DISCUSSION OF THE PAPER OF DR. MARGARET ARCHER

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I. The paper

Professor Archer began her presentation on solidarity recalling the long history of social scientific analysis of the factors leading to conflict and the loss of a sense of social cohesion in the West. Karl Marx proposed class conflict as a fundamental element of capitalism. Max Weber recounted the long process of the disenchantment of the world and the eventual restriction of options represented by the “iron cage”, which modern individuals live in due to the lure of material prosperity. Emile Durkheim analyzed the pathologies generated by the division of labor – that very economic development that Adam Smith explained to be the motive force behind increased prosperity.

Out of this contested tradition have arisen two main options in the politics of Western nations, roughly collectivism and individualism, or liberal and labor parties, offering what has come to be called the “lib/lab” options. Post World War II Europe saw the “golden years” of a consensus that institutionalized solidarity to a considerable extent in both the economy and government. Business firms certainly sought a profit, but their interests were closely tied to the well-being of the population of the nation where they were located, generating a willingness to give at least limited support to the institutions of solidarity of that era.

Yet subsequent developments have shown a dramatic erosion of solidarity in nearly all areas of life. Economically, multinational firms today look to a worldwide labor supply and market for their products and are no longer tied to the population of any one nation for their long-term success in the now-global market.

Politically, a similar separation occurred. With the loss of intergenerational continuity, durable social capital, stable societal roles, lasting normativity, and the sense of geo-local belonging, the political bases for solidarity eroded over time. Political parties that traditionally had identified themselves by moral or ideological commitments – everyone knew what labor and conservative parties stood for – now have come to “appeal to the middle” and propose technocratic solutions. Today we have “tactical governments”, that choose positions based on what will generate more votes, not by long

term strategies rooted in political philosophy and moral commitment. This generates government by regulation, with government policies originally animated by solidarity now evaluated by performance indicators. It narrows “what counts” to the quantifiable rather than assessing whether there is service to the human person and the common good.

As a result of the systemic difficulties in embodying solidarity in economic and political life, Professor Archer looks for hope in gradualism, small scale embodiments of solidarity in a world which needs more but is at least for now incapable of generating it.

II. Responses

Lord David Alton cautioned that we not let a concession to gradualism become a lapse into complacency. Given the vast scale of the problems facing the 800 million poorest people on earth, he urged strong efforts to break the poverty and dependency so prevalent in our world. He called for education for virtuous citizenship.

Professor Paul Zulu spoke to the great difficulty in restoring social solidarity once it has been lost, and observed that in important ways, that solidarity still exists in many African situations, often animated by the solidarity of church communities, for example, as has been illustrated in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. A similar example is evident in the development of groups committed to mutual support – instead of the Western insurance instruments available to the wealthier. In a similar vein, Professor Villacorta observed that less developed societies today face problems similar to those faced in the West perhaps a century ago. Such societies are searching for appropriate structures and tend to see those of Western nations not as a model but perhaps as an inspiration, learning from both successes and failures.

Professor Sabourin reaffirmed Archer’s notion of the existence of “politics without conviction” in contemporary life, but proposed that in spite of the rigidities of contemporary political life, new forms of solidarity are appearing, not only in new enterprises but in some regions of international governance. The key is that solidarity is fundamental to the nature of the human person: it is both a concept and a mindset that needs to be more widely shared.

Professor Hertzke assessed our situation by reference to “the lost world of solidarity” that existed before the Leviathans of market and state overwhelmed more organic and local social bonds and cooperative enterprise. Social solidarity is vital for effective governance but is undermined by excessive government, which in a beneficial effort to further civil rights, feminist, and anti-racist movements, has at times undermined solidarity and

further privatized the church and undermined its defense of marriage and the family. Nonetheless, solidarity does depend on proper policies that create deference for the institutions of civil society, which create and sustain networks of trust and social capital.

We might employ an economic metaphor here, understanding social capital as a stock, with trust as the flow that increases the supply of that stock. Our problem today is that we are using up the stock of social capital faster than we are replenishing it by an ongoing generation of trust. In the analysis of Professor Zamagni, it is actions of reciprocity that generate the trust that renovates the networks of solidarity essential to a fully human life.

III. Agreements

There has been a clear erosion of solidarity in most nations of the world, most especially in Europe and North America. This runs contrary to what we know both from the nature of the human person and from biblical revelation. Yet neither source of insight has the persuasive power it once had.

The power of the both market and government is large and growing. The globalization of the market has fundamentally altered the capacity of states to structure their own domestic economies to ensure the solidarity that is essential for human flourishing. As there is no international government to turn to, a creative development of stronger international governance through voluntary agreements of nation states is an important way forward to greater global solidarity. At the same time, essential efforts are underway that develop both attitudes and institutions supporting greater solidarity at the local level.

IV. Issues

What are the causes of the loss of solidarity (and of the “instrumentalization of virtue,” as Professor Matlary put it) that we have experienced in the West? Candidates include capitalism, “rights” movements, consumerism, greed, or a progressive individuation of life and culture over the past millennium. Are these related? How? Are some more fundamental than others?

Is the situation different and perhaps more hopeful outside the industrialized nations of the North? Are the less developed nations today destined to follow the same path of weakened solidarity as the wealthy nations have? Can the industrialized world learn from the structures and traditions of solidarity of the developing world?

Is there hope for the “education for virtuous citizenship” referred to by Lord Alton? How would that occur? We all know of small-scale examples of hope. Is there hope on a large scale, and if so, how best do we foster it?