

Preface

John Gray provided a comprehensive argument against global capitalism in his 1998 book *False dawn. The delusions of global capitalism*. The following synopsis, providing context for the reader of this paper, can be found on www.Amazon.com:

Back when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister of Great Britain, John Gray was an influential conservative thinker, whose writings helped influence the revitalization of the laissez-faire market in that country. Now, as free-market champions seek to make over the (mostly) postcommunist world in their own image, Gray has experienced a moment of apostasy. *False Dawn* argues that, far from bringing about economic paradise, global capitalism, left unchecked, "could well destroy liberal civilization." Gray is careful to distinguish "global capitalism" from "globalization," which he identifies as a broader tendency encompassing "the increasing interconnection of economic and cultural life in distant parts of the world." That societies around the world are coming into closer contact with each other is inevitable; that they will have to do so in a free market, particularly one largely shaped by Anglo-American economic values, is not. In fact, Gray says, pointing to the recent economic crises in Asia and Russia, such a model will not bring societies together, but may well tear them apart. "A worldwide free market," he warns, "is no more self-regulating than the national free markets of the past.... Unless it is reformed radically, the world economy risks falling apart in a replay, at once tragic and farcical, of the trade wars, competitive devaluations, economic collapses and political upheavals of the 1930s."

Is globalization really, as John Gray argues, a "false dawn?"

Dawn stands for a new beginning, progress, improvement, and thus life. *False* suggests that something is wrong with that promise. What a fitting title for John Gray's book. The word *globalization*, though, or *global capitalism*, as in the book's title, is rather imprecise. The dictionary defines "global" as "[p]ertaining to or embracing the totality of a number of items, categories, etc." (emphasis is mine). Globalization does not embrace the totality of humankind. More than 80% of the world's citizens have no Internet access. The ratio of phone lines to citizens in prosperous, mostly western countries is five times higher than in poor and small (economically insignificant) countries. The TV set ratio is only marginally better. Diseases, poverty and food insecurity are terrible problems in Africa and other poor parts of the planet. I am avoiding the term *developing world* because it is unfit. What is developing? Isn't the gap in actuality widening? Capital simply moves on to new grounds when economic prospects decline. It does that in the "developing" and in the "developed" world. In its path, "Slash-and-burn capitalism" (Gray, 1998, p. 196) leaves irreparable marks on earth and on people. The efforts of activists, NGOs, and select countries to help the underprivileged are trivial in comparison to corporate conglomerates' vitality. Yes, Bob Geldof's Live Aid collected some much-needed money. Yet I am a bit cynical about his second installment (G8 concert series). I do understand the intention: raise awareness. But in my eyes, these events were used to entertain, and to promote personality or product. They gave people reason to party and get their minds off the stressful things in their lives (Where am I going to spend my vacation? Is my partner faithful? I wonder whether the Yankees win in Boston...). And who were those people that attended the concerts? Was it not mostly the well-to-do young? What about the so-called stars? Did they not travel first-class and stay in luxury hotels? It is easy to ponder over social problems while experiencing economic and personal security. We have become so used to the world's discrepancies. Few issues afflicting the underprivileged raise eyebrows any longer. And why, in any event, are we using market-methodology (product, promotion, spectacle, consumerism) to bring to mind the consequences of the market? It seems as paradoxical to me as fighting fire with gasoline.

The gap between those who profit from the market and those who have little to no benefit is widening. And it is not only the poor any longer who worry. The technology and knowledge evolution that began in the Renaissance turns out to be Pandora's Box. Some of my friends in (economically fairly healthy) Germany worry about the future of their careers, despite having an education and experience. I, on the other hand, heard it often that I could not get a good job without a degree. So I went to college to get one in my current profession. Now that I am done, the corporate information technology (IT) job-market is changing. IT is in a process of commodification because its complexity is reducing. Just as cars and

household appliances became easier to use over time, IT emerges to be more user-friendly and less administration-intensive. What is left in terms of humans having to *manage* IT is more often than ever automated or offshored to save money. Such profit-driven industry transformations cause the "disappearance of entire occupations" (Gray, 1998, p. 72) and deskill workers. Harsh socio-economic consequences result from unsophisticated work replacing lost jobs and generating mediocre incomes at best. People move downward from their income-range category and face difficulties maintaining their life standard. Social costs eventually shift to the public (Gray, 1998, p. 72). Case in point: Wal-Mart.

In agreeing with Gray's seventh argument (the market corrodes society, 1998, p. 217), I am once again surrendering to my moralist view on the world's issues. I travel to Germany once per year and follow what is happening in the country through reading magazines such as *Der Spiegel*. Germany is changing. Slower than America, but following a similar path. For sure, Germany does not have ethnic issues warranting a comparison with the U.S. But there are cultural subjects that demand attention (Turkish community relations, integrating new migrants, the nation's identity, its place in the EU and the world). Germans also do not (yet) carry guns by conviction or due to availability, and aggression and violence in society are not that widespread (comparatively speaking, I will return to this in a moment). In economic terms, Germans are, on average, still a little better off. Still, I am noticing more homeless people on Hamburg's and Frankfurt's streets than in the 1990s. Poverty and ghettos are on the rise, too. I hope that the upcoming elections lead to a coalition between the Social and Christian democrats. It will reduce lame-duck-maneuvering and stop their bickering. It will force politicians to get some work done. Though, my hope reveals yet another paradox: the market causes social issues, but economic patchwork policies are supposed to address them?

Aggression in society is *the* issue that worries me most. America uses many more negatively loaded and aggressive symbols in daily life, in language, advertising, movies, and TV news, than Germany. And most of America's *innovations* diffuse with relative ease in Germany. Perhaps it was only a matter of time until violence and aggression, too, would resurface in German society, after a long period of sorrow and remorse? I remember one school shooting in Germany from the 1980s. It caused a major shock at the time and perplexed the entire country. Mind that weapons are not a common sight in Germany, and that violence, fighting, and combat are not as visible in German society as they are in America. The RAF's terrorism in the 1970s was the one exception that stands out, but the group somewhat vanished in the 1980s. The rising trend of aggression in German schools culminated in another shooting just a few years ago. It was worse than Columbine, just by the numbers. There is a key difference between the two shootings. A mentally disturbed adult carried out the former, and a High School student who could not withstand education demands did the latter. My fear is that the *tolerance barrier* is sliding. Tolerance, in this context, is a measuring point that distinguishes behavior. School shooting examples are admittedly drastic and horrific events no matter where they happen, but there are other indicators, too, that behavioral thresholds are generally changing. For the tolerance barrier grounds in morality, it implies comprehension and demonstration of *good* behavior. Sustaining noble relationships, being respectful toward others, and being honest are three examples of behavior checked by the tolerance barrier. Not killing people, of course, is as well. But if the tolerance barrier descends (broadly, throughout society) so that it becomes acceptable to violate what used to be the previous standard of good behavior, people change their behavior *and* perceive it as normal at the same time. Behavior becomes a cause and an effect. Already, people today are more disposed than ever to act immorally. The media helps corroding the tolerance barrier by disseminating how to soften it. Awful or poor behavior is seen as "OK," because "everybody does it." Cheating on taxes or deceiving large institutions is considered as if "no one got hurt." People form and disband work and private alliances rapidly to achieve economic or power gains. Lying and cheating are justified means to reach ends. A tenant in my mother's house once presented himself to a contractor doing work in the apartment as her nephew, so to have a better position in negotiations. He also suggested to my mother that it would be best not to pay the contractor's bill and wait to see whether he sues. Such behavior is opportunistic, unethical, and wrong. John Gray wrote fittingly that the market causes "relationships [to become] consumer goods" (1998, p. 37). Dishonesty, deception, discrimination,

and aggressiveness towards others who are seemingly weaker, to intimidate and betray them, and to manifest one's own position are increasingly considered acceptable practices. The competitive market demands and promotes these practices and little distinction is left between the domains *market* and *society*. By surrendering to the market's demand, we, the society, indeed opened Pandora's Box.

Although Germany does not instill competitiveness in its young as early as America does, through schools and sports, the country is catching up quickly. Yet the question whether observable changes in societies anywhere are on the rise or whether they always existed has merit. Perhaps we rarely observed changes since the media did not exploit them? It is a combination of both. The media's penetration of society is pervasive. Its reporting is more sophisticated than ever. Not in terms of quality, but in terms of repetition and dramatization. Drama sells, so the media exploits it. But there are *more* incidents to report about. Denying this would mean that society remained static, for example, throughout the economic ups and downs of the 1980s and 1990s. It would deny that rural America changed after manufacturing jobs went overseas starting in the 1970s, and that big businesses currently repeat the offshoring frenzy for service jobs. It would deny the increase of aggression in music, TV, and movies, and the changing meaning of family relations and marriage since the 1950s. It would deny social conditioning.

There are scholars and politicians who believe that participation in the worldwide economy and access to capital and technology are the only hope societies have. The enlightenment, they find, embodies the techniques and values that, if applied properly, will solve all the world's issues. In contrast to such functional, technologically deterministic views stand proposals to slow down capitalist consumerism and re-emphasize human well-being. Conceivably, loosening the grip of the market, returning to closer relations within the community and with nature, and ensuring equal provision of goods, safety, and freedom could change the world for the better. Could it happen? I do not think so. Globalization is the enlightenment's climax. It is the beginning of the end. I have no faith that the world will turn around. Despite our being "enlightened," we will not truly grasp what is wrong with globalization and capitalist consumerism. Nor will we change our current path. The rich will not one day surrender and redistribute at least some of their wealth to establish equality. There seems to be only one option left. We need a wake up call, a major crisis. What the powerful and wealthy (nations, firms, and individuals) have secured for themselves needs to be taken away and destroyed. The system must collapse to facilitate a new beginning. To avoid an ethics dilemma I am not suggesting that the disadvantaged should cart off what the rich have in their possessions. The former do not have the vigor or ability to force widespread egalitarianism anyway. My preference would be a financial meltdown that ruins the world. Of course, this would affect me personally as well. But it would facilitate a new beginning. It would afford an opportunity to establish equality. The proposal has merit because of a psychological aspect. The human race tops the food chain. Our only enemies are earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes. We have little respect for this planet, different species, or each other. And we are quite arrogant in this. It is therefore time for a reality check. Despite its side effects (revolts, poverty, destruction, deaths), a collapse of capitalism will reinstate some of the human and social qualities. Why? Because loss unites. It moderates ambition. It humbles. The "new" system that will follow the collapse will have to be a market as well. There is just no alternative to it. I only hope that we get it right this time around.

References

Gray, J. (1998). *False dawn. The delusions of global capitalism*. New York: The New Press.

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