

## **IN THE WAKE OF HOMO OECONOMICUS: HOMO MUNDIALIS?The countervailing human agency of civil society: a definite beacon of hope**

**by Raff Carmen**

At the very moment that, for the first time in history, global questions need to be answered about how to inhabit and govern the planet, the principal institutions which, in the past, allowed the exertion of social control over society, are voluntarily abdicating their responsibility. Government, whose prime function it is to protect its citizens, has been reduced to being promulgator of a free enterprise in which everything has a price and is potentially up for sale. During the 18 years of exposure to Thatcherism and its bastard child, Majorism in Britain, for example, this process was fed by a determination and fanaticism the likes of which were not seen since the hayday of that other great 20th century totalitarianism, communism. With monetary control at the mercy of ceaselessly shifting global forces, ever greater numbers of young people in the affluent north are condemned to marginalization and exclusion through structural unemployment, while the south illegally exploits up to 3/4 billion (and rising) young children.

'Development of the underdeveloped', that quintessentially mid-twentieth century Western project, was never anything but the mirror-image of homo oeconomicus' idiosyncratic world construct which assigns 'the economy' an autonomous existence. Helped along by the accidents of history, its characteristics, like a pandemic, subsequently spread over all geographical areas and virtually all societies around the globe. It has now been conclusively shown that the core development premise, namely that "'you' can be like 'us'", is not replicable on a planetary scale.

Most of the globalization dilemmas we now face are rooted in the universal sweep of homo mundialis' competitive master game in which there are bound to be some winners but far more losers. The world's top billionaires - about 400 of them - enjoy a combined income equivalent to that of 2.5 billion of world's poorest. 200 multinational enterprises combined represent a quarter of the world's total economic output, yet they employ less than 20 million people, ie less than 1% of the potential global workforce.

However incongruous, the comparison with 20th century communism is well-deserved: what we end up with is a new form of totalitarianism. The newfangled globalized economic and financial regimes subordinate the legitimate social rights and aspirations of the citizen to the unbending laws of competitive logic which is inherently hostile to a culture of accountability, - except perhaps towards its shareholders. . . . If, indeed, public ownership, a planned economy and a society commanded from above were all what socialism amounts to, then socialism indeed has truly been vanquished by capitalism and Fukuyama's 'end of history' is already with us. The perverse "Your-Consumption-Is-Our-Jobs" logic, -- ie, that production is more necessary for the employment it provides than for the consumption goods it produces --, is all-pervasive. It makes aspirations to chose different ways of organizing society collectively or the defense of a more sane, steady-state economics, politically unwise and socially illegitimate (Amalric).

And yet, there must be limits to competition (Petrella) and there is a structural inevitability (Pradervand) in the emergence of a paradigm which counters the hegemony of the present universal win-lose game, be it only for the fact that this mode carries in it the seeds of its own nemesis. 'Adaptation', compliance and

integration are no option. 'Adapt to what?', 'integrate into what?' one may ask. To the faceless diktats of the international markets? Or in the predatory games of conquest of the omnipresent multinationals? Instead of compliance and adaptation, the very tools at the disposal of the generals stoking the fires of the global selfdestructive competitive wargame are equally at the disposal of those determined to foster a new shared global consciousness and a new global solidarity.

One of the many tragedies accompanying global development is the emergence of a uniform culture built on the ruins of a severely depleted and impoverished cultural diversity. For too long, culture has commonly been perceived in terms of customs and folklore, of mere 'aspects', 'inputs' or 'factors'. Or in terms of barriers, constraints or obstacles in the way of 'progress'. In the last resort, culture means 'people', who they are, where they are, how they think, speak and generally express themselves, what they can do and how they do it. It is their ways of life, the 'matrix' in which their very cultural identities are shaped. It is culture which has always shaped the infinite variety of possible human landscapes. That is why a culturally-sterilised economy, and hence, 'development', is often 'nothing more than a bubble, a creature of fiction 'inside which a sterile elite produces little, except massive debts'(Verhelst, 1993:6). As the example of the world of fauna and flora so clearly illustrates, riches and wealth derive from diversity: uniformity means regression and ultimately extinction and death. Yet, references to diversity, non-conformity and autonomy in development matters are routinely smothered in a welter of negative connotations.

Considering the amount of energy, brainpower and financial resources that have gone into making the formal Economics of Development a success over the last fifty years, value-for-money has, ironically, been one of the primary casualties. So have, even more seriously, the sense of justice, the imperatives of the environment, cultural identities, in one word, of the very values which give meaning and direction to human lives. Global development has shaken humanity, literally, to its very foundations. It has triggered the 'crisis of the foundations' (Max-Neef).

The situation would indeed be hopeless if the dominant culture were hegemonic. Countervailing this 'culture of power' wielded by 'Prince'(state) and 'Merchant'(market), there will always be Citizens' countervailing 'power of culture' to not only resist, but more importantly (re)create and build. A transculturalism, a globalism, and a universalism which pretends to be valid for all people and for all times casting an 'end of history' shadow over our common future is constantly being challenged by a concept of development which recognizes and is ready to enter in dialogue with a multitude of cultures. It is not the population which needs integrating 'in' development, -- in the same way as it is not women who need integrating 'in' what is, to a large extent a male-dominated domain (re:WID), -- it is development which needs integrating in people's multifarious ways of understanding themselves as individuals and as communities. 'Global Development' as a monolithic, universal objective and phenomenon has always been a contradiction in terms. It was Sankara, the young president of a country he symbolically renamed Burkina Faso who, in the eighties, defined autonomous development as the right and the capacity of a people to invent and reinvent their own future. What we ought to be aiming for is a plurality of developments inside and alongside the globalizing mainstream, ie the exact opposite of the deafening 'global development' consensus.

State and Market have dominated, for too long, what we may and may not think about development, which, reserved as it almost exclusively was to (macro) Political Economics and neutral development Agencies, used to focus on things large. Things

local, things ethical, things cultural, things ecological and things political or things belonging to the domain of women tended to be forgotten or be treated as externalities. Now it is the turn of civil society's human agency.

The primary meaning of 'agency' (from the Lat. 'agere') denotes action, operation, and power. Only in a derivative sense does it refer to organizations or services set up to act on behalf of others. In a creationist/liberatory educational context, agency denotes the ability to act and intervene, this being a precondition of creative knowledge. By autonomous human agency we mean people acting autonomously as subjects, as distinct from people being acted upon as objects and possibly being used as participants in interventionist initiatives, projects and programmes which are not theirs. (Adult) Education itself is a form of agency, ie an act of cooperative, democratic knowledge creation. As people are the 'resource' which is always in plentiful supply, interactive education and communication will, as a matter of course, assume a key role in the emergence and consolidation of this human agency.

The 'act locally, think globally' of yore is in the process of becoming a daily 'act locally, act globally' reality: the added value of globalization for civil society, or the third sector, resides among others in the fact that small local events or initiatives, such as, for example the recent rapid global spread of LETS (Local Exchange Trading Systems)(Carmen,1997), have the potential to penetrate and transform the global sphere in a world where global and local are increasingly interchangeable.

Bolstering this revalorisation of the local is the seachange that has taken place in the macro sphere, too. It is no coincidence that 'Development Ethics' and 'Business Ethics' have only relatively recently burst on the scene as vigorous new subdisciplines. In part they fill the intellectual vacuum left by the disappearance of the dominant rival model of the communist bloc's command economy: a honest and rigorous exposure of the deficiencies of Economics, Development and Business as unquestionably practices in the dominant capitalist system now is both possible and perceived as legitimate.

Will Hutton, celebrating with his "Now There Is An Alternative" title the recent reversals on the British political scene, observes that it is not the Left, but the Right which has proven to be the real casualty of the Fall of Communism: "suddenly the air is full, not with what 'can't be done' and is prohibited, but how public power can be harnessed for common goals. The Conservatives know that now they have to develop an ideology which is consistent both with a strong welfare state and a powerful, well-funded NHS and state Education system"(1997).

While the Market has traditionally had private agents acting for private ends, the Third Sector has millions of private agents acting for public ends. People need not feel powerless if there is at least a realistic chance that the discussions and actions in their local groups, their neighbourhood associations, their NGO's and Unions or, as manifest in eg the NAAM village group federations in the West African Sahel, or in the cooperative enterpreneurial learning Organizational Workshops in both Latin America and Africa (Carmen,1997), are actually leading to 'another' kind of democratic practice where, directly or indirectly, the State and the Market are progressively made less alienating and more and more accountable to the third sector.

The interactive politics, the embedded economics and the creative human agency of civil society inspired and invigorated with the real possibility of an effective global resonance are a definite beacon of hope.

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