

Approaching Globalisation

Markus SIDOROFF

Markus SIDOROFF, the Solidarity Coordinator of WSCF Europe, reflects on a lecture given by Michael TAYLOR at the 2008 Solidarity conference in Budapest

Though we have all heard of globalisation and experience it at some level, it is not easy to define - nor is it easy to evaluate our response. Michael TAYLOR, an emeritus professor of social theology at the University of Birmingham, has made an academic investigation of globalisation. As an ordained minister and former director of Christian Aid, he keenly appreciates the religious convictions and development issues that affect an understanding of globalisation. Having worked for the World Bank on development issues, he is also familiar with the institutions and systems of the international market. With this insight, he insists that, “globalisation is not a new phenomenon but has become intensified in recent times.”

Though the topic of globalisation is complex, at the WSCF Europe solidarity conference, ‘A Just Life or just life?’ in Budapest in April 2008, Michael TAYLOR introduced participants to methods of approaching and understanding globalisation.

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“Firstly, globalisation has to do with the increasing movement and interconnectedness of people (as they travel), goods, services, ideas and the mobility of capital across national borders, all greatly helped by advanced information technology and the media.”

Few would see this mobility as negative in itself. Globalisation has made international exchange and co-operation possible in a way that it never was before. International NGOs such as WSCF experience the benefit of this: simply, the internet has made it easier to communicate with people throughout the world.

Globalisation also allows greater cultural exchange and the ability of people to move about. Members of western welfare societies are able to see and enjoy the fruits of this globalisation on the High Street. Not only is the laptop I am writing this article on made in China but we can buy crafts from Africa and India. Later, I might choose between eating Mexican or Thai food. I might also contemplate taking a Yoga class or an Afro-Caribbean dance lesson. As mobility has increased, western societies have become more multicultural than ever and western culture has been enriched by influences from other continents.

Yet, we must consider whether the ‘west’ is benefiting more than other parts of the world from these ‘exotic spices’ that enrich our lives. In return we do not just export western products or aspects of popular culture but a dominant culture governed by the mechanisms of the global market which originate with and centre on western interests. This dominant culture is hard to resist and overwhelms ways of living and structuring society in the developing world where peoples are in danger of losing their own cultural identities. This is what Michael TAYLOR calls the spread of western culture or ‘cultural imperialism.’ This is the second way of approaching an understanding of globalisation. Western culture comes to determine how the culture in the developing world evolves and is exported.



Markus SIDOROFF (born 1982) is the Solidarity Coordinator of WSCF Europe. Currently he is completing his masters degree in music education and works as a choir conductor and music teacher in Helsinki. In his free time Markus enjoys jogging, literature and the company of good friends.

Michael TAYLOR was a member of SCM as a student. He has taught social ethics in the University of Manchester UK and was Principal of a theological college there for 15 years, he was Director of Christian Aid in London UK for 12 years, president of the Jubilee 2000 Debt Campaign, member of two commissions of the WCC, and he is a patron of SCM UK and now Emeritus Professor of Social Theology in the University of Birmingham. Michael TAYLOR has written books on theology, worship, ethics and development.

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food and mass-produced popular culture, that we look abroad for new answers, while continuing to export this pop culture.

Where there is resistance to this process and reaction against alienation, “globalisation”, as Michael TAYLOR said, “may affect most parts of the world but is not necessarily a unifying force, provoking the reassertion of identities and cultures, the so-called ‘clash of civilisations’ and a widening gap between rich and poor between and within countries.”

We have already referred to the third feature that “has to do with the rise of a global economy which, since the collapse of socialism, is characterised as (free) market capitalism.” The rise of the global economy is indeed the most common association of globalisation and for many of us ‘market capitalism’ has connotations of greed and selfishness, especially in the current financial climate. Michael TAYLOR, however, spoke first of its benefits:

“Market capitalism has led to a spectacular improvement in living standards in some parts of the world (notably Western Europe) though often at the expense of others. It is now benefiting millions most obviously in India and China. By opening up to the market instead of relying on aid and charity, poor countries can trade their way out of poverty however painful it may be at first. The ‘market’ is an effective mechanism for matching supply and demand and a democratic one as well.”

It is interesting to note that according to western thinking even democracy (of which we are rightly proud) is something we can export. Democracies in their modern form grew out of Christian soil on the one hand and from the

Even Buddhism has in places been imported as a consumer good and lifestyle choice. There is an irony here; many in Europe now look to Asian and African cultures and religions to give deeper meaning to their lives, which have already been cut off from our own cultural roots and Christian heritage. We have become so infected by the staleness of the market and Hollywood films, junk

tradition of Western philosophy on the other. We have to question the appropriateness of democracy (at least as we currently understand it now) for Islamic societies.

Criticism of Market Capitalism

Michael TAYLOR reports that some Christians regard market capitalism as a “heresy, because it inevitably benefits the rich at the expense of the poor, which is fundamentally against Gospel values: so you can’t be a Christian and a capitalist (even though many have and western Christianity and the Protestant work ethic have been supportive of it). The Reformist position would say that capitalism is not wholly bad though there is a great deal wrong with it. There may not be any obvious alternative but there is a lot of room for reform.”

Elaborating on this, Michael TAYLOR led us through five significant problems with market capitalism that call for reform:

1) “Although poor countries are encouraged to trade their way out of poverty, the trading system is unfair. Lowering of trade barriers gives the advantage to strong trading nations and companies. The demand for low prices (for clothing for example) means low wages and sweat shops. Poor countries are forbidden to subsidise their industries or protect them as a condition of aid, whilst the US and the EU do both. Rich nations dictate economic policies to poor countries which should be free to decide for themselves. Big companies moving in can destroy the local economy and local markets. These and other problems have given rise to the Fair Trade movement.”

Not everybody in the global north benefits from this tendency either. In Finland, for example, big companies in the paper industry have downsized their factories and moved to countries where there is a cheaper labour force, thus increasing the problem of unemployment. This is interpreted as the sign of a dynamic company but many



of these companies make profit from the relocation, while firing workers, etc. They were simply seeking greater returns for their shareholders.

2) “The investment of surplus earnings is at the heart of capitalism but all too often it is short-term speculation to make money quickly rather than long-term investment involving sharing risks and creating stability. Too much money making has little to do with providing goods and services, and too much irresponsible lending and borrowing has produced the international debt crisis where poor countries have to choose between servicing their loans and providing schools and health care for their people. Those who organised the loans were not the ones who suffered when things went wrong, hence the Jubilee campaign to cancel the debts of the poorest countries.”

Again, irresponsible lending and borrowing has had severe consequences in the global north as well. In the United States hundreds of thousands of Americans have lost their homes because they have not been able to pay unreasonable interest on sub prime loans. This then led to



the global financial crisis that we are currently experiencing. We do not know how deep this depression will be yet, but confidence in the banks and economic system is already breaking down and the economy of a well known welfare society, Iceland, has collapsed.

Yet, because global financial systems are so interdependent, those suffering the most from the financial crisis are from the world's poorest countries. They have depended on aid and investment from developed countries and made themselves vulnerable by opening to global markets. Now the danger is that they will lose the level of development they have achieved and be set back into poverty. Whilst welfare systems in the north will support those set back by the global financial crisis, aid budgets for the southern world are tightening and at risk of failing.

3) "Capitalism is all about economic growth and creating wealth which is supposed to 'trickle down' and benefit everyone eventually. It is not however very good at distributing the wealth it creates, thus widening the gap between rich and poor and achieving growth at unacceptable cost to the world's limited resources, to the environment and to society, its cohesion and its values."

4) "Capitalism prefers the free market and private enterprise to governments which it regards as inefficient and likes to shrink. This leads to problems when privatising public services like the water supply, which become subject to commercial pressures instead of meeting basic needs. Markets need regulating by governments so that large companies and monopolies are kept under control, and markets cannot do everything including providing roads, education, social security and care for the environment."

It seems that the biggest problem of market capitalism is that the only value that counts is money. In order to flourish, or at least to fulfil basic human needs, we need strong government and an active civil society. Churches can play their part, not just through campaigning but by being centres of civil society and encouraging a set of alternative values.

5) "Behind many of these problems are issues of power, and where there is an imbalance of power (between rich and poor countries and people, at global institutions like the WTO and the World Bank, between the movement of capital and restrictions on the movement of labour, where international companies have more influence than governments) there tends to be injustice."

What is to be done?

"One obvious suggestion is to change the people who run the global economy, but there is little evidence that they do change despite the efforts of religious and moral movements. This approach is certainly not enough by itself.

"A second suggestion is to change the structures that keep and make people poor, such as working for fairer trade agreements, keeping countries out of unmanageable debts and introducing measures to combat climate change. These changes require good policy work plus effective advocacy and mobilisation of people to persuade governments to act. These changes also take time and meanwhile people suffer and need support, and thus aid programmes have their place.

"A third suggestion (and these suggestions are not mutually exclusive) is to try to change the culture or the inner spirit or the values of the global economy away from a narrow concern with growth and consumerism towards sustainability, a more rounded view of human development and, some would say, 'happiness'.

"A fourth suggestion may be the most fundamental and that is to redress imbalances of power wherever we can."

The global economy, as powerful as it seems, is fully dependent on human well-being and on our ecosystem. We need to acknowledge that both wealth and growth have their limits because we are finite human beings with finite resources at our disposal. The ideology of market

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capitalism promises unfettered growth that is just not possible and the mechanisms of the market treat human beings as controllable units in economic calculations. To be realistic about all of this is one way to begin to redress the balance of power. This also includes issues of sustainability: sustainability can only be realised when people are empowered to play a democratic part in the market, not only by decision making but also by setting the agenda and participating in deliberation.

Due to efficient campaigning and advocacy work, awareness about the global economy and its negative effects has risen tremendously in the west. Consumers today are more aware than before and many want to buy ethically produced goods. Workers and producers, taking charge of their own work and eliminating the middleman, form one of the most important parts of the Fair Trade movement. Therefore international companies are slowly facing pressure to reform their exploitive practices. So there are at least some signs of things going in the right direction.

Where does Christianity come in?

Michael TAYLOR has a considered response: “Even those who strongly disagree and believe Christianity is highly committed, for example, to social justice, have to acknowledge that it doesn’t have all the answers. Christian insights have to engage with the insights of other disciplines like economics if sensible policies are to emerge.

“Whilst it is important to love our neighbours, Christian compassion cannot stop at charity and personal kindness. If compassion is not willing to change structures then it is little more than self-preservation (keeping things the way they are) and not compassion at all.

“Christians should draw on the insights of their tradition such as the Jubilee idea, the realism which recognises how incorrigibly self-interested human beings can be, the priority given to the poor in the Gospel and ideas of justice,

as long as they don’t ‘apply’ them in simple and naive ways without engaging with more factual information and other relevant disciplines.

“Human beings may be ‘sinners’ but they are also made in the image of God which means they are essentially creative beings, so that Christians above all, wherever they work and play and live, should be interested in finding new solutions to old problems, not just mending the world but ‘making all things new’, including the economic order with its tensions between competition and co-operation, growth and sustainability, public and private enterprises, freedom and regulation, fair distribution and rewards, etc.

“Finally Christians should be hopeful people which does not mean they are superficial optimists or believers in endless progress. They are not utopians but they do believe that any situation is open and not closed (hopeless) where more good can be done and more justice and happiness achieved. If things can never be perfect they can always be better.”

Being a Christian means a call for action. Christ did not only give us beautiful images and an ideology about loving our neighbour. He concretely showed us how to do it by healing the ill, dining with sinners, by taking the side of the rejected. He even took it to extreme by giving up all his glory and becoming one of the rejected and poor himself. We are given an opportunity to follow his example and do our share. This should make Christianity a practical way of life, following Christ in meeting the disempowered and excluded and being part of an agenda for change. Michael TAYLOR left all with a resonating challenge: to not be afraid when offered influential positions with power and responsibility - good people are needed.

Michael TAYLOR’s thorough presentation set a precedent for the rest of the conference, in which participants learned more about globalisation and justice, individual and collective responsibility from different perspectives. Some of the inputs can be read elsewhere in this journal.