Why Not Globalization?

Following is the text of a talk Steve Talbott gave at the "Technology and Globalization Teach-In" held February 24-25 in New York City. Convened at Hunter College, the Teach-In was organized by the International Forum on Globalization.

Good morning.

Some of you may have seen the January/February issue of *Foreign Policy*, where novelist Mario Vargas Llosa writes about "The Culture of Liberty." Globalization, he tells us, does not suffocate local cultures; it liberates them.

Vargas Llosa does admit that modernization takes a toll on traditional life. "The festivals, attire, customs, ceremonies, rites, and beliefs that in the past gave humanity its folkloric and ethnological variety are progressively disappearing or confining themselves to minority sectors." But he goes on to contend:

First, "When given the option to choose freely, peoples, sometimes counter to what their leaders or intellectual traditionalists would like, opt for modernization without the slightest ambiguity."

Second, "the allegations against globalization and in favor of cultural identity reveal a static conception of culture that has no historical basis." That is, cultures *always* change; the question is only *how* they will do so.

In the third place, the very notion of cultural identity, he says, "is dangerous .... It threatens humanity's most precious achievement: freedom." People are, after all, more than crystallizations of their culture. "The concept of identity, when not employed on an exclusively individual scale, is inherently reductionist and dehumanizing, a collectivist and ideological abstraction...."

Machine vs. Human Thinking

Now, I happen to think there's profound truth in what Vargas Llosa says. And yet, he fails — at least on the evidence of this article — to recognize the extreme distortions and imbalances at work in the globalizing forces we actually see today.

Can we acknowledge these distortions while at the same time holding firmly to what is true in the novelist's remarks? Unfortunately, this is *almost* impossible today, due to our deepening impulse to think like machines. By this I mean: to think with the wooden, either-or mindset that says, globalization *or* localization, individual identity *or* cultural identity.

What I want to do is briefly to characterize this pathology, which goes beyond the particular thoughts we have in our heads. It's reflected in the underlying quality of our thinking activity, whether mechanical on the one hand, or imaginative and organic on the other. A humane and social thinking does not rattle around mechanically between logical opposites. Like the healthy human being, it brings contrary movements into something like the harmony of a dance. So let's try this dance for a moment with the ideas of globalization and localization.

It's obvious enough that globalization won't buy you much if the societies and places you "globalize" are by that very process denatured, devalued, deprived of their local savor. You end up with global relations that are relations of same to same, in which case there isn't much reason to relate. When all the emphasis is on universal connectivity and none is on deepening the distinctive contributions of the people and institutions you are connecting, then everything loses its individual character — which is much the same as losing its existence. You perfect a global syntax for interaction, but there's no one left you'd care to interact with, no one who offers anything different from the homogenized culture that already surrounds you.

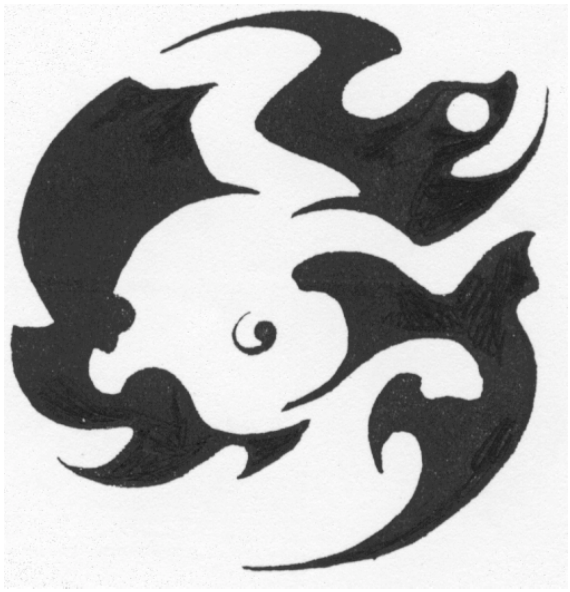
Globalization, then, to be meaningful, already includes within itself the necessity for a strengthened movement toward localization. Local communities must gain ever greater powers of self-definition in order to hold the balance against the leveling tendencies of globalization, and by doing this they make globalization worthwhile.

So much for globalization as a self-sufficient ideal. But we can look at localization in the same way. While a local community can provide richly textured contexts worth saving, it's the very nature of context to be unbounded, to open outward without rigid limit. In ecological terms, every habitat is bound up with its neighboring habitats, and so on ever outward. So localization implies an openness to the globe. This is demonstrated by the fact that the people struggling most heroically to preserve their own, locally rooted lives today are being forced to recognize and do battle against an array of global institutions. They become true global citizens precisely because they love the places where they live.

Somehow we have to become flexible and imaginative enough in our thinking to hold these "opposites" — globalization and localization — together in a harmonious counterpoint. It's crucial to acknowledge and credit a certain

drive toward universality in the modern human being. But the person who becomes most truly universal will also be the person who becomes most truly individual, centered and grounded in himself. And what is true of the individual is also true of communities. No community can become meaningfully universal or global except by cultivating its own distinctiveness, its own values. Then, the necessities of its ever richer life will impel it toward an appropriate global awareness.

But if globalization and localization need and imply each other, clearly the proper globalization we're talking about has little in common with the destructive process we see today. I do not go global by forsaking my own place, but rather by intensifying its unique significance so far that it finally becomes an achievement, a revelation, of universal import.



Martina Müller

So it's not that we should tell traditional cultures, "Stay as you are." Rather, it's that these cultures should be allowed to evolve according to the intrinsic logic of their own traditions, their own wisdom — which, *of course*, will lead them beyond themselves, and which, *of course*, will be a path influenced by contacts with the rest of the world. But this is quite different from inundating a people beneath foreign ways that have no foundation of support within their own traditions and values, and that are inherently corrosive to the very idea of traditions and values.

If we really wanted a global village, we would *start* with the local culture, learn to live in it, share in it, appreciate it, begin to recognize what is highest in it — what expresses its noblest and most universal ideals — and then encourage *from within the culture* the development and fulfillment of these ideals.

Unfortunately, we in the technologically driven societies have failed miserably in assessing the consequences of technology for ourselves. So we're hardly in a position to offer the gifts of technology in a healthy and appropriate way to other, quite different cultures.

Individual and Community

Returning, then, to Mario Vargas Llosa: He wants to preserve the individual's freedom — with perfect reason. He also wants to protect the individual's identity against usurpation by some collectivist abstraction — again with perfect reason. After all, in a mere side-by-side aggregation or collective, the individual's identity may indeed compete with the group's.

But community is not an abstract, collectivist reality — except in the globalist thinking that Vargas Llosa seems to be supporting. Instead of a simple, mechanical opposition between individual and culture, he should have made a double statement reflecting two intertwined truths:

> First, you cannot have a cultural community — certainly not a forward-looking community in our day — unless it is founded upon the free individual.
>
> And, second, you cannot have a true individual who is cut off from community. It is through our rooted and enduring relations to those around us that we become most deeply ourselves.

Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf education, once remarked,

> The healthy social life is found when in the mirror of each human soul the whole community finds its reflection, and when in the community the virtue of each one is living.

Words like these are easily spoken, but for most of us it may require a lifetime to learn to think productively about society in such organic terms. And we never will think this way if we continue yielding passively to the influence of our machines.

I believe it's a pretty fair definition of technology to say something like this: technology consists of the machinery and the mental habits conducive to a dead thinking. (Note: "conducive to dead thinking," not "absolutely necessitating such thinking.") *(continued on p. 19)*

enough. But every worldview also has its practical effect on human action. The more we believe that genes determine our physical and mental constitution, the more we will be willing to tinker with those genes to change characteristics.

And this will occur in the name of human rationality. In 1998 a group of scientists met to discuss genetic manipulation of human beings, and the proceedings were published two years later (20). The participants promoted the view that science must progress and that genetic modification of human beings is inevitable. "Science proceeds and succeeds by doing….what we're talking about here are incremental advances with enormous implications" (20, p. 80). James Watson, the co-discoverer of the double-helix model of DNA and the first head of the Human Genome Project, made the following comment:

> Some people are going to have to have some guts and try germline therapy without completely knowing that it's going to work…. And the other thing, because no one has the guts to say it, if we could make better human beings by knowing how to add genes, why shouldn't we do it? What's wrong with it? Who is telling us not to do it? I mean, it just seems obvious now…. If you could cure what I feel is a very serious disease — that is, stupidity — it would be a great thing for people who are otherwise going to be born seriously disadvantaged. We should be honest and say that we shouldn't just accept things that are incurable. I just think, "What would make someone else's life better?" And if we can help without too much risk, we've got to go ahead. (20, p. 79)

Watson is known for his blunt statements, revealing, we believe, a widespread sentiment that other scientists share, but don't dare to express: the path of genetic engineering leads to the human being, and we shouldn't close our eyes to this inevitable fact. The real challenge, in this view, is to convince the public. The book's editors, scientists Gregory Stock and John Campbell, write:

> To think rationally about ethical issues in germline engineering requires basic understanding of inquiry-based analysis and general scientific (biological) background…. If all scientists were to make a commitment to improving K-12 science education in their local communities, we might eventually have a society capable of thinking analytically and rationally about the challenges and opportunities of science — including germline engineering. (20, p. 24)

In other words, people are not smart enough to see where science needs to take humanity. If we could get all elementary school children to isolate genes, middle school children to sequence them, and finally high school students to manipulate organisms with the genes, then we'd have the proper preparation. Of course, all learning about living organisms in their natural habitats would have to be dropped to provide space for such a high-tech curriculum. This would be the way to further "rational thinking."

In reality, what Stock and Campbell are aiming at is indoctrination in reductionism, so that people will lose the capacity to see through the weak and outlandish arguments of a Nobel laureate like James Watson. It's astounding that we've come so far that being rational is equated with tearing a narrow, genetic segment from the fabric of life and treating it as though it were everything. You're rational if you restrict yourself from seeing how your sector of knowledge relates to a larger whole.

As we have shown, the results of modern genetics are shouting at us to wake up and see that we've got to start taking the whole organism seriously and view genes in light of the organism and not only the other way around. Genetics began by defining genes in relation to a particular trait, ignoring the experimental and conceptual framework, and also ignoring the organism as a dynamic, changing entity. Now the emphasis should be on *how* an organism utilizes its genes within this broader context. Goethe would be happy, knowing that even the paramount reductionist science is showing — if not consciously recognizing — that he was right in emphasizing the "how" of nature and not just the "what."

But the reductionist path is well worn and deeply entrenched. Once you're in it, it's hard to climb out. It's not easy to break out of habits and change an inner direction. It means giving up the security that comes with focusing on our own particular program that biases the mind from the outset. ("Understanding an organism means reducing its functions to underlying mechanisms.") Instead, our focus needs to be on entering the richness of the phenomena themselves and changing our viewpoints in order to do justice to what we discover. Instead of barraging the world with a monologue, we enter into conversation with it. How else can we hope to find deeper understanding and responsible ways of acting?

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(continued from p.4) Examples of such thinking are everywhere. We build mechanical connections between people and we call that the "infrastructure of community." We convert the natural world into massive data sets, and we call that "ecological understanding." We send trillion-dollar capital flows streaming daily through the world, seeking nothing more than their own mathematical increase, and we call that "social development." This is machine thinking.

The English philologist and historian, Owen Barfield, has pointed out how our medieval forebears enthusiastically elaborated the possibilities of logical judgment. Not coincidentally, medieval society was hierarchical in structure. Social hierarchy is a kind of outward embodiment of logical classification. That's why the principle of hierarchy could hardly be disputed during the medieval era; it seemed as self-evident as the necessary logical structure of one's own thinking. Barfield goes on to suggest that we will reap only chaos if our new, democratic social forms are not as self-evidently grounded in the developing strength of a living imagination, as the old ones were grounded in the strength of logical judgment. When, through the power of imagination, the whole community finds its reflection in the individual soul, and when through the same power each of us learns to contribute our own virtue to the whole community, then not just a king, but every citizen, will feel, however dimly, *l'etat c'est moi*, I am the state.

Unfortunately, chaos — and not a new social harmony — appears the more immediate prospect. The technologies now overwhelming society stem from a one-sided preoccupation with the perfection of logical subtlety. (I'm sure the medieval doctors would have been struck dumb with amazement at seeing a printout of the silicon logic of an Intel Pentium.) And these same technologies are widely recognized to be killing off the budding imaginations of our children.

I'd like to mention in conclusion that I work for a small research organization in upstate New York called The Nature Institute. We try to cultivate an understanding of nature and society based on imaginative, ecological thinking. That is, we pursue a science that is qualitative, holistic, and contextual.

In our view, what we need today is not globalism as it is currently understood, but holism. We can't, however, produce healthy social wholes until we are capable of *thinking* them. I hope I have suggested to you that the battle for the globe is at the same time a battle for local places and, ultimately, a battle for the quality of your and my thinking.

Thank you.