

Part IV: Reading, Writing and Comprehension

Excerpts from the Introduction: Development and Globalization in McMichael, Philip (2004). "Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective", Pine Forge Press

What Is the World Coming To?

These days, the term globalization is on practically everyone's lips. Or so it would seem. One of the distinguishing features of this new century is the powerful **apparatus** of communication that presents an image of a world unified by global technologies and products and their universal appeal. It is almost as if there is no alternative to this image of globalization. And yet we know that while 75 percent of the world's population has access to daily television reception, only 20 percent of the world's population has access to consumer cash or credit.

In an article addressed to North American coffee drinkers, dated January 5, 1999, The Washington Post headlined "*Where were your beans grown?*" and bylined the observation that coffee farming in Central America is reducing the songbird population. Russell Greenberg, a scientist from the Smithsonian Institute, has documented that the decline of bird life in Central America is related partly to the boom in coffee drinking. As rain forests have disappeared, 150 species of migratory songbirds have relocated to the traditional shade trees that protect young coffee plants on the plantations. As coffee drinking intensifies, farmers remove the shade trees and substitute sunlight and chemicals to accelerate bean growth, thereby reducing bird habitats.

This kind of environmental impact is widespread and indicates the conflict between rising market demand for globally produced goods and the sustainability of ecological and social systems at the points of production. The world was shocked when, in 1998, tropical hurricanes wrought widespread disaster in Central America as mudslides destroyed thousands of low-income dwellings and the lives of many of their inhabitants. Vulnerability to mudslides was a consequence of over-logging of the rain forests for timber, commercial cropland, and pastures to sustain lucrative exports to the world market. Central America was losing about 180 acres of trees an hour. And global warming was blamed for the torrential rains that fell that year in Central America as well as in China and Bangladesh.

The Global Marketplace

Much of what we wear, use, and consume today has global origins. Even when a product has a domestic "Made In . . ." label, its journey to market probably combines components and labor from production and assembly sites around the world. Sneakers, or parts thereof, might be produced in China or Indonesia, blue jeans assembled in the Philippines, a transistor radio or compact disk player put together in Singapore, and a watch made in Hong Kong. The fast food eaten by North Americans may include chicken diced in Mexico or hamburger beef from cattle raised in Costa Rica. And, depending on taste, our coffee is from Southeast Asia, the Americas, or Africa. **We may not be global citizens, yet, but we are all global consumers.** The global marketplace binds us all. The Japanese eat poultry fattened in Thailand

with American corn, using chopsticks made with wood from Indonesian or Chilean forests. Canadians eat strawberries grown in Mexico with fertilizer from the United States. Consumers on both sides of the Atlantic wear clothes assembled in Saipan with Chinese labor, drink orange juice from concentrate made with Brazilian oranges, and decorate their homes with flowers from Colombia. The British and French eat green beans from Kenya, and cocoa from Ghana finds its way into Swiss chocolate. Consumers everywhere are surrounded and often identified by world products.

Commodity Chains and Development

The global marketplace is a **tapestry** of networks of commodity exchanges that bind producers and consumers across the world. In any one network, there is a sequence of production stages, located in a number of countries at sites that provide inputs of labor and materials contributing to the fabrication of a final product. Sociologists call these networks commodity chains. Chains link each input stage, as a local combination of commodities, and together these phases form a finished good sold in the global marketplace. The chain **metaphor** illuminates the interconnections among producing communities dispersed across the world. And it allows us to understand that when we consume a final product in a commodity chain, we participate in a global process that links us to a variety of places, people and resources. While we may experience consumption individually, it is a fundamentally social (and environmental) act.

Not everything we consume has such global origins, but the trend toward these worldwide supply networks is powerful. It is transforming the scale of economic development, reaching beyond regional and national boundaries. Some researchers, for example, have noted that the ingredients of a container of yogurt - from the strawberries and milk to the cardboard and ink for the carton - travel more than 6,000 miles to the market in Germany, and yet all could be produced within a 50-mile radius. As more and more goods and services are produced on this transnational scale, development assumes a different meaning. In the past, we understood development to be a process of economic growth organized nationally, but today, global economic integration is transforming development into a process of globally organized economic growth.

Global Networks

The global labor force is dispersed among the production links of these commodity chains. In the U.S.-based athletic shoe industry, the initial labor is related to the symbolic side of the shoe design and marketing. This step remains primarily in the United States. Then there is the labor of producing the synthetic materials; of dyeing, cutting, and stitching; and of assembling, packing, and transporting. These forms of labor are all relatively unskilled and often performed by women, especially South Koreans, Taiwanese, Chinese, Indonesians, and Filipinos. Companies such as Nike subcontract with such labor forces through local firms in the regional production sites.

Another example from the global marketplace concerns conditions of work, illustrated in the global food industry. More and more fruits and vegetables are being grown under corporate contract by peasants and agricultural laborers around the world. Chile exports grapes, apples, pears, apricots, cherries, peaches, and avocados to the United States during the winter months. Caribbean nations produce bananas, citrus fruits, and frozen vegetables, and Mexico supplies American supermarkets with tomatoes, broccoli, bell peppers, cucumbers, and cantaloupes. Thailand grows pineapples and

asparagus for the Japanese market, and Kenya exports strawberries, mangoes, and chilies to Europe. In short, the global fruit and salad bowl is bottomless. In an era when much of this production is organized by huge food companies that subcontract with growers and sell in consumer markets across the world, these growers face new conditions of work.

Again, most contract-growing of fruits and vegetables is done by women. Women are considered more reliable as workers than men; they can be trained to monitor plant health and growth and to handle fruit and work efficiently. Employers presume that women are more suited to the seasonal and intermittent employment practices (e.g., harvesting, processing, and packing) necessary to mount a flexible operation. Increasingly, the needs of the global market shape the conditions of work and livelihoods in communities across the world.

The Social Web of the Global Market

Globalization is ultimately experienced locally. It is difficult to imagine the changing web of social networks across the world that produce our market culture. We do not think about the global dimensions of the product we purchase at a supermarket or store. And we do not think about the power of transnational firms that shape the global market and its rules. The market, as well as its far-reaching effects on our lives, seems almost natural. Along many of the commodity chains that sustain our lifestyle are people who experience globalization in quite different ways. Many are not consumers of commodities: Four-fifths of the roughly 6 billion people in the world do not have access to consumer cash or credit. Even so, they are often the producers of what we consume, and their societies are shaped as profoundly by the global marketplace as ours, if not more so. We seldom remember this.

Rain forest destruction, for example, is linked to the expanding global market, although the connections are not always direct. Since the 1970s, Brazilian peasants have been displaced as their land has been taken for high-tech production of soybeans for export to feed Japanese livestock. These people have migrated en masse from the Brazilian southeast to the Amazon region to settle on rain forest land. Their dramatic encroachment on the forest captured the world's attention in the 1980s, lending impetus to the 1992 Earth Summit. It forced the industrialized world to see a link between poverty and environmental destruction. Less obvious, however, is the precipitating connection between rising demand for animal protein in the Northern Hemisphere and rain forest destruction. And this connection is **obscured** by our customary view of development as a national process, making it even more difficult for us to view this episode as a global dynamic with particular local effects. Products that may be everyday items of consumption, particularly in the wealthier segments of the global market, may have considerable effects on producers and producing regions where they are made.

As we begin to examine the social links, we see that they are often **tenuous** and unsustainable. The more links that are made, the more interdependent become the fortunes of laborers, producers, and consumers across the world. A change in fashion can throw a whole producing community out of work. A **footloose** firm seeking lower wages can do the same thing. A new food preference in one part of the world will intensify export agriculture somewhere else. **Affluent** consumer access to global food supplies reduces the supply of fresh, local, and healthy food choices everywhere (whether in supermarket cultures or agrarian cultures converted to agri-exporting). Intensification may offer the security of a contract to a grower community for a time, but it may also increase that community's **vulnerability** to a more

competitive producer elsewhere, given the variability of land fertility and wages, and the mobility of firms. The intensification of beef exporting may displace not only a peasant community, but a local culture of mixed economy, interwoven with food crops and livestock, also may give way to specialized pasturing of steers. It also may affect the economic priorities of a nation as well as that nation's (and the world's) resource base.

Dimensions of Social Change in the Global Marketplace

The changing composition and rhythms of the global marketplace connect people and development conditions across the world. Such interconnections have three dimensions:

- First, there is the integration of producers and consumers across space as commodities crisscross political boundaries.
- Second, this spatial integration introduces new dimensions of time as world market rhythms enter into and connect physically separate communities. For instance, a firm that establishes an export site in a community brings new work disciplines in the production of goods for the global market.
- Third, once communities are integrated in the new time and space of the global market, they are increasingly subject to decisions made by powerful market agencies such as governments, firms, and currency or commodity speculators. If oil prices spike, for example, the effect is felt by a variety of groups in the global economy, from farmers to petrochemical firms to travelers. If there is a run on national currencies, as in the 1997 Asian financial crisis, whole populations can suffer as they have in Indonesia, Thailand, and South Korea.

The global market's continual reorganization dramatically affects the livelihoods of people and their life **trajectories**. But this game continually reshuffles the employment deck and people's futures. And although money makes this world go around, its accelerated circulation compresses people's lives into a unified social space (the global marketplace) and time (the rhythms and cycles of the global economy). As financial markets are deregulated, whole countries (e.g., Argentina in 2001) can **plummet** into material, psychological, and political crisis overnight. We are seeing the actions of humankind endangering the habitability of the planet. Here the long run, or rather our sense of it, is compromised by the finiteness of biospheric resources: perhaps the most dramatic effect of the compression of space and time.