

Economic Justice

by Patricia M. Mische

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We live today in an axial period of history, with major changes underway in all the world's systems, including our economic system. The global flow of information, goods, services, and money, and the integration of national economies in a worldwide economy, has happened at a speed, on a scale, and with social impacts unprecedented in human history.

Money is now less like coins and paper currencies, and more like protons, electrons, and neutrons. It has taken the form of electronic impulses that circulate instantly around the world. The flow of economic power away from nation-states is palpable; some corporations now have more wealth and power than most nation-states, yet are not subject to the same democratic accountability that binds most national governments.

If aggregate economic growth is one's primary criterion of human well-being, this trend may not be a cause of alarm for some. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development's World Investment Report tells us that in the twentieth century, the global economy multiplied 17 times, from an annual output of \$2.3 trillion in 1900 to \$39 trillion in 1998. (In the three years from 1995 to 1998, economic growth exceeded that of the 10,000 years from the beginning of agriculture until 1900.) Per capita income multiplied from \$1,500 to \$6,600. Life expectancy increased from 35 to 66 years. More food was produced than ever before. Coupled with economic growth, advancements in science and technology made it possible for more people than ever to live longer, healthier, and more productive lives.

But the benefits of this growth were not evenly distributed. While one fifth of the world population now live better lives than ever, another fifth struggle to survive with little or no access to safe water or adequate nutrition, shelter, education, or employment. This gap is compounded by poor countries' foreign debt, whose effects include not only hunger, disease, and illiteracy at home, but violent conflict and refugee flows affecting people in creditor countries as well.

Clearly, globalization is an urgent topic in many parts of the world. It is also a volatile one, as recent protests in Seattle and Washington, DC, have demonstrated. In those protests, people from a wide diversity of cultures and backgrounds, representing various civil-society groups, pitted themselves against the political and economic powers that were negotiating a new global trade order. Both groups — those inside and those on the streets outside—represent forms of globalization. Those on the streets represented new global forces emerging from below; those inside assumed a globalization from above. Both were pressing for new forms of governance, including global governance. For the most part, those on the streets sought more democratic participation in the global forces and decisions affecting the well-being of people and of the Earth on which we all depend. Those inside were focused on the well-being of large, corporate entities, national economies, and competition for markets, resources, and balance-of-trade.

Questions of global governance have become a central challenge at the dawn of this new millennium. Symptoms of breakdown are evident at every level of life -- economic, political, cultural, ecological, and spiritual. Old systems that were created to serve the needs of traditional civilizations of the past, and the state-centric system of the modern world, can no longer respond effectively to the challenges of rapid globalization and increasing global interdependence; new systems capable of meeting these challenges in humane and effective ways are not yet in place.

Those of us living in these times are called to new levels of creativity and cooperation to forge a path through our present confusion and uncertainties toward a more a viable and humane future. We are challenged to be the creative minority of which the historian Arnold Toynbee wrote — people who, from deep insight, commitment, and motivation, develop a new civilization from the ashes of the old.

Achieving economic justice includes redressing the negative effects of globalization and distributing its benefits more equitably among all people and areas of the world. In society's evolution from isolated clans and tribes to city-states and kingdoms to nation-states, each change included changes in political structures, with the development of a public sector at increasingly larger levels to manage the problems and opportunities resulting from increasing interdependence. The larger units did not necessarily eliminate local polities; more often they added a new layer to manage problems that could not be dealt with at smaller levels. Today, the continued evolution of society requires the development of democratic forms of global governance to deal with global interdependence. These new forms may involve a greatly reformed UN or new global organizations; they will require nation-states to pool and delegate some sovereignty for the sake of the greater good. Life in a global community requires new forms of governance -- humane, effective, participatory public structures -- at all levels where decisions need to be made about our shared future: local, national, regional, and global. While as many decisions as possible should be made at local or national levels, some problems require a global polity and a global public sector delegated with sufficient authority to act effectively for the global common good on issues beyond the competence of individual nation-states.

Yet no matter how comprehensive and wise these structures of governance are, it may be difficult to enforce laws imposed from above if they have not become accepted norms in our hearts and minds. Inner laws are sometimes just as strong as, or stronger than, the laws codified by states, and may be a necessary precursor to effective law under political authority. It is imperative, then, that we develop norms or laws in our own hearts and minds that reflect a sense of shared responsibility for the common good of all our neighbors in the global community.

This will require still other forms of globalization -- forms that must match, exceed, and ultimately mitigate the negative forms. These other forms include a globalization of human consciousness, worldviews, wisdom, ethics, and moral codes, so that we see and act for the global common good. They include a globalization of human compassion, growing from the global extension of our answers to the questions, who is my neighbor? Who my sister, my brother? Who my mother, my father? Who is my child? They include a globalization of ever-deepening awareness, love, and care of our living Earth, from whom our own lives emerged and upon whose integrity and diversity the lives of future generations depend. They include a globalization of spirit--an enlargement of our very souls.

Learning how to open our hearts, minds, and souls to all creation and become one human family in the larger community of life is a process some have begun, but most of us still have a long way to go. This

practice requires individual commitment and a willingness to jump into the givenness of our times and lives in personal and collective ways. It requires that we not sink into despair or cynicism, but use these times as a springboard for transformation, growing from what we are into what our deepest longing and knowing draws us to become.