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The Regionalist Answer

*Robert Wolf**

Like so many others who are locked into the centralized world-view of modern-day rationalism, Professor Chen cannot imagine an alternative to our interlocking economic, cultural and legal system that homogenizes people and places with astounding rapidity. The idea of a quiltwork of self-sustaining regional economies world wide, living within the bounds of nature, does not occur to him as a possibility. Even the specter of a worldwide ecological cataclysm—a possibility he admits is underway—does not shake him into rethinking alternatives to the present, seemingly unstoppable, global dynamic.

When Professor Chen writes that “globalization marks the end of an epoch,” he means it not metaphorically, but literally, as “an epoch in the geological sense.” Relating a possibility in human history to a fact of natural history is a mistake. His article is factually flawed and contains several fatal internal contradictions. While he admits that globalization threatens place-based communities, drives down wages world-wide, widens the disparity between rich and poor, and undermines the nation state, Professor Chen ultimately defends the global economy on three incredible grounds: 1) that it increases overall wealth; 2) that it offers a bulwark against ecological destruction; and 3) that it is an instigator of democracy and morality among the peoples of undeveloped portions of the world. These threatened peoples, whom he calls, “economic and cultural turtles,” are globalization’s “losers.”

Professor Chen acknowledges “the spectacles of mass extinction gives rhetorical ammunition to all opponents of globalization.” The destruction, he notes, is occurring on two fronts. First, the “natural world [is] in ecological cataclysm” and, second, human societies and cultures worldwide are threatened. “In this dual sense,” he writes, “globalization is nothing short of the end of the world.” Chen is critical of backward economies, those which offer the greatest resistance to globalization. It is they, the losers, who pose the greatest threat to the environment and have brought us to the verge of ecological extinction, not the

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transnational corporations. It is the losers' plundering of the global commons, their "flawed efforts at self-help, [which] if unchecked, will beggar us all." This being the case, the only sane response is to embrace globalization, which alone can assure a healthy environment. As the professor puts it: "To the extent that globalized society must choose between memes [cultural replicators] and genes, it should systematically favor the environment over jobs and even culture."

According to Chen, the losers "are leading the backlash against contemporary international economic law. As long as these losers continue to wield political leverage, globalization's fate rests largely on the law's response." In other words, if the recalcitrants won't accept globalization of their own free will, we will force it on them through the adoption of international legal regimes. Chen does not ask what we will do if the losers do not accept what we have enacted for their ultimate own good. Nor does he ask how this totalitarian action squares with his avowed concern to see democracy universalized.

Professor Chen admits that globalization has failed to bring about one of modernity's dreams: everyone's right to be rich. "Modernity was supposed to make everyone rich, and equally so." But it hasn't. In fact, he admits that globalization even "widens the gap between haves and have-nots" and "bears the blame for the fading of the dream of development as a universal norm." Chen also sees place-based communities, with their unskilled workers as "the economic equivalent of ecological niches." These communities-regions, subregions, small towns are threatened by globalization as "the economic environment at large becomes increasingly homogenized." These undeveloped regions are poor by consumerist standards, and as Chen notes, they can no longer depend upon a welfare state to support them. In fact, as he remarks, nation-states themselves are on the wane.¹

Competition breeds mobility, and both highly skilled workers and corporations will move where they can make the most money, instigating bidding wars for businesses among countries, states, and cities. The result: "nationstates in a globalized economy arguably undertake a 'race to the bottom' in the effort to avoid expelling fugitive capital."

1. See Kenichi Ohmae, *THE END OF THE NATION STATE: THE RISE OF REGIONAL ECONOMIES* (1995). Chen's reference is to Ohmae's book, which argues persuasively for the future of regional economies.

Chen makes three incredible claims about the benefits of globalization. First, Chen argues that “[a]lthough globalization has surely created its share of losers, the class of winners in the post-Cold War era is vastly deeper and richer. . . . Globalization unequivocally shows that free trade enhances overall wealth.” In the first place, as has been pointed out time and again, there is a distinction between wealth and money.² Wealth is manifested in tangible items, including agricultural produce, natural resources, tools, machines, and labor. Money is a human artifact, a medium of exchange. Reinterpreting Professor Chen’s statement, we can understand it in either of two ways: 1) that there is more money in the free trade world than in the world before free trade, and that most of today’s rich have far more money than their predecessors, or 2) that more money is spread among more people today than was spread among them before free trade.

The first statement is true, but hardly a defense of global free trade. The expansion of global trade has stimulated banks to issue more credit, and thus increase the supply of money, most of which goes into the hands of a few. As of this writing, the world has 458 billionaires, whose “combined net worth of \$760 billion, [is] equal to that of the bottom 45 percent of the world’s population”³ This is the increased disparity between the rich and poor that Professor Chen acknowledges.

The second statement is not true. A look at U.S. salaries over the last three decades shows that an economy dominated by giant corporations actually shrinks salaries. “Average real wages (corrected for inflation) have been falling since the early 1970’s. By 1992, average weekly earnings in the private, non-agricultural part of the U.S. economy were 19 percent below their peak in the early 1970s. Nearly one-fourth of the U.S. workforce now earns less than the 1968 minimum wage!”⁴

If one wants to look abroad for examples of the transnationals’ impact on foreign workers, we can begin by looking at the Mexican economy. “According to the *New York Times* in October 1996, Mexicans have seen a 70% dip in their buying power in the

2. David Korten, *Money versus Wealth, YES!: A JOURNAL OF POSITIVE FUTURES*, Spring 1997, at 7. See also Emerson, *Wealth, THE CONDUCT OF LIFE* (1860); Thoreau, *Economy, WALDEN* (1854); Ruskin, *Work, CROWN OF WILD OLIVES* (1886); and William Morris, *Useful Work v. Useless Toil, SIGNS OF CHANGE* (1888).

3. Richard J. Barnett, *Stateless Corporations: Lords of the Global Economy, CORPORATIONS ARE GONNA GET YOUR MAMA* (1996), at 15.

4. See *id.* at 17.

past decade. Over 40% of the drop in the buying power has occurred since NAFTA. Even workers with secure and high-paying jobs (bank clerks, brokerage employees, engineers) are losing them. With Mexican interest rates over 70% and NAFTA investment rules forbidding government intervention, there has been an explosion of foreclosures on homes, automobiles and small businesses.⁵ The same story noted that 17,000 Mexican businesses have failed since NAFTA. Three months earlier, the *New York Times* reported "that the number of Mexican citizens living in extreme poverty was now 22 million, up 23% from before NAFTA."⁶

Professor Chen's second claim on behalf of globalization rests on his assertion that it is the losers who "are despoiling the global commons." Does he think we will believe that the "economic turtles" are the very ones responsible for global warming or ozone depletion or the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico? Does he expect us to believe that the very people who are "undeveloped" are the ones who have made extensive use of agricultural pesticides and herbicides over the past fifty years? Are we to believe that it is the have-nots who are manufacturing refrigerators and air conditioners and convincing the rest of the world to deplete the ozone layer with fluorocarbons? Does Professor Chen really think that the world's poor are the ones warming the planet's atmosphere and choking us with car exhaust and smokestack pollutants?

In fact, the IMF and the World Bank have been responsible for great ecological devastation in Third World countries for the reason that loans are conditional upon "structured adjustment programs" that privatize national resources and industries, putting them in the hands of corporations often based in G-7 countries. These corporations not only exploit the resources for the benefit of corporate investors and the impoverishment of the locals, but contribute to pollution and environmental degradation. The privatization of the power industry in India's state of Orissa, for example, has led to extensive coal mining, while "Global greenhouse gas emissions continue their steady climb to dangerous heights, with 3 percent of manmade global greenhouse gas emissions coming from Orissa alone." The organization, *50 Years is Enough*, has extensive documentation on

5. Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, *NAFTA's Broken Promises*, CORPORATIONS ARE GONNA GET YOUR MAMA, at 118.

6. *See id.*

environmental degradation brought on by the IMF and World Bank.⁷

Professor Chen's third claim is that "[c]itizens who have a stake in global capital markets are exporting democratic values," "even moral values." We are asked to believe that the IMF, the World Bank, financial speculators, CEOs, and mutual funds managers are acting as a catalyst for world democracy. But examining their record abroad, we should examine their at home. Far from strengthening our republican form of government, the megalithic corporations have undermined it through their campaign contributions. The cost of elections is now so high that elected officials spend much of their time in office raising funds for their next campaign. Worse, they are beholden to corporate interests, not to citizens, and legislate accordingly.⁸ For many years the auto industry stymied efforts to pass a national law requiring air bags. One auto safety expert estimates that as many as 140,000 Americans died in "auto crashes since the 1970s because auto companies' legislative privilege effectively thwarted all efforts to develop and legally mandate the device in American cars."⁹ A look at OSHA's negligence in filing criminal charges against corporations is very instructive with regard to the power of campaign contributions.¹⁰

Not unexpectedly, with the high costs of campaigns, members of Congress refuse to enact campaign finance reform. Does this help explain why sixty-five percent of the American electorate now fails to vote? Clearly a sizable number believe that their votes do not count. Even elected judges, as a recent Bill Moyers PBS special made clear, are unduly influenced by campaign contributors.¹¹ The judicial and legislative systems are both in the hands of big business.

7. 50 Years is Enough: U.S. Network for Global Economic Justice, *Destroying Orissa, Fueling Climate Change*, at <www.50years.org/factsheets/Orissa.html>. 50 Years Is Enough has compiled lots of data on the IMF and the World Bank. Its website maintains fact sheets on damage the banks have done in Third World countries.

8. See <www.commoncause.org/index.html>.

9. Russell Mokhiber, *Corporate Crime: Underworld USA*, CORPORATIONS ARE GONNA GET YOUR MAMA, at 62.

10. See *id.*, at 62.

11. See Stephen Talbot & Shelia Kaplan and Bill Moyers, *Justice for Sale*, FRONTLINE, Nov. 23, 1999. This FRONTLINE special included interviews with U.S. Supreme Court Justices, Justice Stephen Breyer and Justice Anthony Kennedy, both of whom were concerned with the problem caused by campaign contributions to judicial elections.

Who then is going to believe that the IMF, the World Bank, and the transnational corporations, the very "citizens who have a stake in global financial markets," are going to export democracy? Not only is there no necessary connection between democracy and financial well-being, current history evidences the reverse. During the NAFTA debate, for example, free trade supporters argued that the trade agreement would "strengthen democracy and improve political and economic stability in Mexico. The opposite has occurred. Anticipation of NAFTA's negative effects sparked the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas on NAFTA's January 1, 1994 implementation date. The poverty-stricken Mayan Indian peasants in the region said NAFTA was their 'death warrant.' National protests supporting the Zapatistas ensued as the Mexican military killed and tortured Mayan prisoners."¹²

Political assassination followed. PRI presidential candidate Ernesto Colosio was murdered, as was Jose Ruiz Massieu, a high ranking PRI official. The brother of former Mexican president Carlos Salinas was arrested for plotting Massieu's murder. Massieu's brother was arrested in the United States on drug charges and complicity in helping cover up his brother's murder. Salinas is in hiding in Ireland, which does not have an extradition treaty with his homeland.¹³

Chen also claims that globalization may introduce "moral values in countries that have yet to realize globalization's full benefits," intimating that globalization is a necessary prerequisite to morality. It follows, of necessity, that all who lived before the GATT and NAFTA era, including Socrates, Jesus, the Buddha, Confucius, and St. Francis, were either amoral (lacked the full moral development and sensibility that comes with participation in the global economy) or were simply immoral. This point of view is what Richard Weaver, in *Ideas Have Consequences*, called "the Whig view of history," the belief that one's own point in history is the high mark of human development and the peak of morality, enlightenment, wisdom, prosperity, and knowledge.¹⁴

Perhaps when he made this claim, Chen was thinking of the situation in a U.S. commonwealth in the Northern Mariana Islands, where thousands of indentured workers have been forced to work 12 to 16 hours a day, including unpaid overtime. The

12. See Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, *supra* note 5, at 119.

13. See *id.*

14. Richard Weaver, *IDEAS HAVE CONSEQUENCES* (1948), at 1.

workers are sometimes yelled at and beaten and live in company dormitories, in cramped quarters, eight per room. One woman said her supervisor forced "loans" from her and other workers who are stitching clothes for the GAP and other U.S. manufacturers. One would think that as a U.S. commonwealth, the moral influence of U.S. transnationals would have made itself felt in the islands.¹⁵ The company in question was subcontracting for The GAP. But surely The Gap, by 1999, would have become a model for responsible and moral business practice. Only four years earlier, in 1995, The Gap had promised to stop subcontracting its work to sweatshops after being targeted by U.S. and Central American labor and religious groups for its El Salvador operations, where females as young as 13 worked as many as 70 hours a week for under 60 cents an hour.¹⁶

Many similar examples exist. In the case of Nike, the shoe manufacturer closed its plants in Maine and New Hampshire, subcontracted in Taiwan and Korea for cheaper labor, and, when workers there began unionizing, shifted operations to other Asian countries where abuses were so bad that human rights groups became involved.¹⁷ Murders have been instigated or committed by Colombian police, including "70 percent of the country's twelve political murders per day during 1993." That same year President Clinton described Colombia as a "valued trading partner" and "one of our strongest allies, not only in the effort to free the world of the scourge of narcotics trafficking, but also in our common desire to see democracy flourish and the rule of law prevail throughout the region."¹⁸

Professor Chen goes on to acknowledge a disastrous consequence of globalism: the loss of cultural diversity, including the demise of many of the world's languages and religions. As he says, "Globalization facilitates the creation and exchange of 'memes' as no other social phenomenon ever has. A 'meme' is a unit of cultural transmission,' such as 'tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches." "Like all other 'living things[s],' the meme is a selfish 'sort of imperialist, seeking to transform as much of its environment as it can into itself and its seed.' . . . Many local cultures

15. Robert Collier, *Saipan Workers Describe Slavery of Sweatshops*, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, Jan. 22, 1999.

16. John Canvagh and Robin Broad, *Global Reach: Workers Fight the Multinationals*, CORPORATIONS ARE GONNA GET YOUR MAMA, at 157.

17. See *id.*, at 159.

18. John Strauber and Sheldon Rampton, TOXIC SLUDGE IS GOOD FOR YOU (1995), at 143.

lose their distinctiveness; cultural diversity evaporates. . . . Threatened losers appeal to potent political allies by arguing that unfettered free trade will make the world unbearably homogenous." That homogenization would create an inhuman world has been claimed by prominent writers, going back at least to the 1960s, most notably with Lewis Mumford in *The Pentagon of Power* and Jacques Ellul in *La Technique*.

As far as Professor Chen is concerned, it is not the transnationals with their homogenizing power that threaten democracy and decency, it is cultural diversity. As you might expect, his solution lies with lawyers, who will "seek to preserve desirable diversity" and "retain enough discretion to identify and eradicate destructive memes." Where anyone would acquire the wisdom to decide such matters in an open question. Note that the point of setting up a panel of Solons who would decide the fate of cultures is, ironically, to preserve democracy.

In contradistinction to the current system, in which power in the form of control and money is the ultimate objective of major players, another system is being conceptualized, a system that is organic, decentralized, and democratic. This new system opposes the vertical integration of industries, and longs to return control to the local level and to re-establish economic and social justice and community.¹⁹

David Korten has assessed the difficulties of creating an alternative to the global system. "It hasn't been easy to create an economic system able to produce 358 billionaires while keeping another 1.3 billion people living in absolute deprivation. It took long and dedicated effort by legions of economists, lawyers, and politicians on the payrolls of monied interests to design and implement such a system." And that, he says, is exactly the kind of effort it will take to redesign society to produce "economic justice and environmental sustainability."²⁰

The answer to the onslaughts of a global economy and culture can only be found in a linkage of relatively self-sustaining regional economies. Such economies once existed across the United States, particularly in rural America where people had, for example, the choice of either milling their own lumber and

19. See Robert Wolf, *Provincial Hope*, AN AMERICAN MOSAIC (1999). The problem of centralization was addressed by the regionalists of the 1930s. This essay lists many who dealt with the problem. Since the 1960s, more books and articles espousing the new paradigm have appeared, including Mumford's *PENTAGON OF POWER* (1974).

20. David Korten, *A Commonsense Citizens' Agenda*, CORPORATIONS ARE GONNA GET YOUR MAMA, at 163.

grain or going without. What follows are a series of notes on some components of possible regional economies and cultures, and the processes that I believe will be sued to nurture them into existence.

Numerous rural regions within the United States are colonized areas, comparable to Third World countries, supplying urban America with the resources that urbanites need to survive, in exchange for which, rural America receives a pittance. As a result, these regions continue losing population.²¹ Other areas of the country simply see their cultures disappearing and their economic well-being dependent upon outside forces. In reaction to this exploitation and powerlessness, increasing numbers of people are talking about regionalism, and often about bioregionalism, which offers an immediate linkage of the population along obvious lines of watershed or topography.²²

Before a self-sufficient regional economy can be built, people have to be convinced that it is possible to build it. Many now feel so powerless they think social democracy and economic justice cannot be revived. The trick is to show them that the current system was built slowly, by changing attitudes, by the abandonment of self-reliance, and by the exchange of a world of qualitative relationships for a "region of quantity."²³ Although Chen sees competition as the defining American characteristic, competition is simply one manifestation of individualism, which has other offspring, including argumentativeness and fragmentation.²⁴ Individualism must be addressed and countered during the preliminary process of regional cultural and economic building.²⁵ Schools must begin teaching the value of cooperation, and as history provides examples of survival through cooperation, local and regional stories exemplifying it should be incorporated into school curriculums. Stories or histories highlighting regional self-sufficiency should also be used.

21. See Robert Wolf, *Developing Regional Rural Economies*, AN AMERICAN MOSAIC.

22. See Thomas Berry, *Bioregions: The Context for Reinhabiting the Earth*, and Gary Synder, *Coming in to the Watershed*, THE GRAY WOLF ANNUAL TEN: CHANGING COMMUNITY (1993).

23. See Rene Guenon, LE REGNE DE LA QUANTITE. Guenon demonstrates the inversion of values which has occurred in the West, beginning in the 14th century, at the time when nominalism replaced realism.

24. Weaver, *supra* note 14, at 52-69, and Guenon, THE CRISIS OF THE MODERN WORLD (1945).

25. James Rinehart, *The Ideology of Competitiveness: Pitting Worker Against Worker*, CORPORATIONS ARE GONNA GET YOUR MAMA.

This is not to say that competition should be abandoned. For just as a person's competitive edge promotes achievement but must be balanced by cooperation, likewise competition between communities must be balanced with cooperation. Self-sufficiency in frontier communities was a necessity, but self-sufficiency was something no one community could attain beyond a primitive standard. It took a region of towns to supply more than the most basic necessities; what one town might not have another did.²⁶ History supplies us with lessons on self-sufficiency. Building on them is a matter of imagination, will, and reason. The imaginations of the young must be developed, for lacking imagination they cannot envision possibilities beyond what they are offered by the present system.

Before capital and large number of jobs can be created, and before the outmigration of the young can be halted, regional consciousness must be developed. One method for building it has come from groups of residents gathering in writing workshops to document their lives and work, and to publish and distribute the resulting stories and essays throughout the region.²⁷ Another recent method has been to develop a book containing photographs along with the natural and social histories of the region, plus a survey of regional assets and needs. This process mixes the quantitative with the qualitative and make vital regional statistics and figures available to all. Compiling such a SCAN is a necessary preliminary to building the businesses and institutions for a robust economy.²⁸

The components of a revived regionalism would include a regional currency. At present there are approximately 60 cities and localities with their own currencies (based on the model of Ithaca Hours), and the movement has gained enough momentum that a national conference on local currency was convened in Chicago during the summer of 1999. While still in its infant stage, local currencies offer the possibility for areas poor in money but rich in resources to create the capital to build a self-sustaining economy.²⁹

26. Robert Wolf, ed. *THE NORTHEAST IOWA BOOK*, at 39.

27. See *id.* and Robert Wolf, ed., *HEARTLAND PORTRAIT*. Free River Press has made it its mission to have people without literary ambition document their lives and work. Both books referenced above are regional in scope.

28. Surveys of Community Assets and Needs (SCANS) are now a fairly common tool among economic developers. The City of Philadelphia's SCAN (1994) is highly regarded. The third section of *THE NORTHEAST IOWA BOOK* is a SCAN, with citizen evaluation of needs playing a vital role.

29. See Robert Swann and Susan Witt, *Local Currencies: Catalysts for Sustainable*

One way that small farmers and retailers can compete with their corporate counterparts is by forming cooperatives that stay small and remain controlled by members. Organic farmers throughout the Midwest have joined cooperatives to sell their milk, meats, and produce at prices above those which their non-organic counterparts are paid. Some organic co-ops market directly to restaurants across the country and get premium prices. In the retail clothing market, for example, small town shoes stores across a region could form a buying cooperative that would lower wholesale prices beyond what any one retailer might achieve by himself.³⁰

Many rural areas have examples of small manufacturing firms which sell to clients across the country. These should be featured in local and regional publications to encourage others to imitate their success. High schools should introduce brief economic lessons with local entrepreneurs explaining their business and how they started it.

To reduce imports, regions should utilize local building materials as much as possible. Depending on the region, limestone quarries, brickworks and lumber mills could be revived. Christopher Alexander sets forth a method for putting the group design of architecture back into the hands of people, and out of the hands of experts who may not be attuned to the pattern language of the region.³¹

Regions intending to become more self-sufficient must not only increase the diversity of crops and livestock grown, but increase marketing within their region. This means selling directly to grocery stores and institutions. Specialty farms are increasing in number as more farmers understand that they cannot remain small and survive by selling staple commodities. There is room for more specialty items grown on a contract basis for retailers in urban areas. In one unusual instance, an Iowa farmer has begun farming shrimp within a closed agricultural system. Community Supported Agriculture is catching throughout the United States. It involves members of a community buying shares in a local farm or garden, which enables the grower to buy seeds and supplies. Members usually join in harvesting the

Regional Economies (1995), a pamphlet, and YES!, Spring 1997, which is devoted primarily to the subject of local currencies.

30. See Christopher Alexander, *THE TIMELESS WAY OF BUILDING* (1979) and *A PATTERN LANGUAGE* (19XX) and Alexander's other books in OUP's Environmental Structure Series.

31. Norman Myers, ed., *GAIA: AN ATLAS OF PLANET MANAGEMENT* (1884), at 62.

crop, and receive bags of groceries throughout the growing season. In addition, any subregion can easily feed itself with a closed agricultural system in which the waste from one part becomes the nutrient for another.³² Greenhouses are also under utilized, and would give northern regions the opportunity to raise vegetables in winter, instead of importing them from Mexico or California.³³

As Chen noted, "Sometimes nations, states, and even smaller political subdivisions will harmonize their legal standards in the face of economic or technological change." Whatever other laws might be changed, a region should bring its many city and county zoning ordinances into closer conformity with one another as a means of preventing sprawl and encouraging a more even distribution of the population. Many rural areas do not understand that zoning can be an ally and that those who would take advantage of a region's resources can be stopped by effective zoning.

A regional economy cannot be sustained by the fact that people occupy a particular area. The ties that create community are those that cannot be quantified, including fair dealing and respect, but these bonds are developed as a regional consciousness and a sense of interdependence are deepened. These can be stimulated, in part, by bringing people together in celebration, with annual regional festivals and original theatrical and musical productions. A popular regional journal (focused on regional development with essays on simplicity, self-sufficiency, cooperatives, and model businesses) would be another such tool.

A quiltwork of regional economies appears to be our only counter to the globalization of world trade and culture, a process of homogenization which an increasing number of people perceive as soulless and dehumanizing. Attempts to build regional economies and cultures will be extremely arduous, but the result of not attempting the task will be the world-wide monoculture now being created by the corporations. Such a culture, assuming it did not destroy itself and the biosphere before it could ever fully eradicate all rivals, would hardly be capable of self-corrective and self-healing measures. For if problem solving depends upon the possibility of perceiving options, then a monoculture which has destroyed alternatives to itself is incapable of self-reflection and therefore of self-correction.

32. See *supra*, note 25, at 49.

33. M. Dugar, *The Plastic in Spain Lies Mainly on the Plain*, *THE FURROW*, Summer 1997, at 4-5.

