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## The Case Against Free Trade

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## **Introduction**

Opponents of free trade are often portrayed as lacking a coherent critique of, and alternative to, capitalist-style globalization. In response to these charges, the present paper sketches three broad arguments against free trade, specifically that free trade is ecologically unsustainable, socially unjust, and inherently undemocratic. The paper also argues that an alternative economic system based on economic self-sufficiency and decentralized political decision-making could better provide for the basic human needs of all in a more socially just and environmentally sustainable fashion. The intended purpose of this paper, which is presented more as a discussion paper than as a research article, is to stimulate debate about the relative merits and demerits of free trade. An extensive bibliography is included which further documents the main claims made in this paper and provides an abundance of evidence that the opponents of free trade are neither incoherent in their critique of globalization nor lacking in creative alternatives.

## **Issue 1: Ecological sustainability**

Advocates of free trade take continued economic growth as their guiding value whereas opponents of free trade favor a steady-state economy which provides for basic human needs in an ecologically sustainable manner. Opponents of free trade would make two specific arguments against unlimited economic growth.

First, unlimited economic growth is not sustainable. The earth is at present facing a set of interrelated problems — from global warming to ozone depletion, acid rain, air pollution, water pollution, toxic waste disposal, deforestation, desertification, overfishing, and declining food pro-

duction — which our present political and economic institutions are simply incapable of dealing with. The root cause of each of these problems lies in a global economic system which is geared towards the overproduction of inessential consumer goods for a rich minority of the earth's population while the basic needs of the majority go unfulfilled. Such overconsumption can only be supported by drawing down both the renewable and nonrenewable resources of the Earth and generating pollution at levels that exceed the Earth's capacity to absorb them. Governments throughout the world continue to pursue the goal of increasing economic growth despite the fact that the present world economy is clearly unsustainable.

In *Beyond the Limits*, an updated version of *The Limits to Growth*, researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology concluded that if present trends continue, economic collapse is possible within the next 35–50 years (Meadows, Meadows, and Randers 1992) — despite all the technological advances (pollution control technology, alternative energy sources, genetic engineering, eco-cars, and the like) currently being touted as “solutions” by those who have a vested interest in keeping the present system as it is. The present system puts profits ahead of sustainability and erroneously equates human well-being with consumerism and unsustainable levels of material consumption.

The second objection is that environmental deterioration affects not only the quality of human life, through increased health risks and a lack of natural amenities, but also the continued existence of other species. At present we are in the middle of one of the largest extinctions in the history of the planet, which is the result not of natural causes but of human economic activity. Approximately 25,000 species go extinct each year — the natural rate of extinction is 1–10 per year (Primack 1993, chap. 4). It is estimated that up to one-fifth of the earth's species could be extinct by the year 2020, and perhaps as much as half by mid-century (Wilson 1992, 278). The question here is whether greater priority should be placed on increasing consumption or on preserving biodiversity.

The ecological economist, Herman E. Daly (1992), proposes that instead of pursuing a high-growth economy we should be working towards the creation of a steady-state economy, which would limit production and

consumption to truly sustainable levels by not using non-renewable resources faster renewable substitutes can be found, not using renewable resources faster than they can be naturally replenished, and not generating pollution faster than the earth is able to absorb it. A steady-state economy does not necessarily imply a zero-growth economy. Steady-state economics distinguishes between qualitative and quantitative changes in the economy. While it is opposed to undifferentiated growth, i.e., growth which represents merely an expansion in quantity, it is not opposed to qualitative improvements, i.e., genuine development, within the limits of sustainability. Certain non-material goods, such as knowledge and technological advances, can be seen, unlike material goods, as having nearly infinite possibilities for expansion. What needs to be held constant are stocks, which include not only natural resources and sinks, but also a constant population and a constant stock of artefacts.

Steady-state economics is by no means opposed to technological innovation, nor does it advocate a return to Neanderthal lifestyles. To the contrary, a steady-state economy seeks to avert the future collapse of both the economy and civilization while at the same time providing for the basic needs of the world's people in an ecologically sustainable fashion. While a steady-state economy would discourage a minority of the earth's people from indulging in luxurious, overconsumptive lifestyles, it would also insure that everyone on the planet has access to adequate housing, food, health care, and education — needs which many of the world's people are unable to meet even in the present high-growth economy.

## **Issue 2: Social justice**

Proponents of free trade argue that economic growth is necessary if social justice for the poor is to be achieved and poverty overcome. This argument is supported in one form or another by both capitalist and Marxist theorists. Some capitalists favor a more or less egalitarian “catch-up” model of development based on the idea that the developing countries will eventually be able to attain the same levels of consumption as the developed countries. Others more or less accept inequality and simply argue that “a rising tide lifts all boats.” Capitalist theorists from developing countries

usually prefer the first of these options, but they nonetheless remain within the paradigm which considers continued economic growth to be both desirable and possible; their argument is not against growth as such but rather in favor of growth being spread more equally.

Opponents of free trade would argue that each country should seek to be as self-sufficient as possible in providing for its basic needs. In a world of environmental limits, equality cannot be achieved through more growth but only through a more equitable distribution of wealth. However, unlike both communist and capitalist state-welfare models, which accept economic growth and see the problem essentially as one of redistributing the benefits of growth, many opponents of free trade would argue that the problem is not how to distribute wealth but rather how to insure that each person has equal access to resources. Thus, the way to achieve social justice is to reduce overconsumption among elites in both the North and South in a way that allows more resources to be used by the poor to meet basic needs. Consumerism should not be regarded as a viable way of life in either the North or the South since it is neither ecologically sustainable nor necessary for humans to enjoy a genuinely high quality of life.

Given current research indicating that it would take at least two additional planet Earths to provide the resources necessary to sustain the current world population at North American standards of living (Wackernagel and Rees 1996, 15), the “catch-up” model of development is clearly utopian. The notion that the purpose of development is to help the poor is, in any event, nothing more than an ideological ploy designed to mask the true ambitions of global capital to further concentrate wealth in its own hands. The hypocrisy of this ideology is fully exposed once it is recognized that current efforts to “help the poor” not only commit the imperialist error of thinking that developed countries have a burden to help “them” become like “us,” but are also specifically intended to strip developing countries of their resources and labor by developing economies based on the export of natural resources, agricultural products, and manufactured goods from developing to developed countries.

Despite the rhetoric that development helps the poor “catch up” with the rich, much official development assistance is not intended to help the

poor at all, but rather to simply help the first world gain further access to third-world resources, labor, and markets. After four decades of concentrated efforts to help the third world “develop,” the gap between the richest 20% of the world’s population and the poorest 20% has actually increased from 30 times more wealth in 1960 to 82 times more wealth in 1995 (“Poor and Rich — The Facts” 1999, 18–19). The ratio was only 1.5:1 two hundred years ago (Schuurman 1993, 10). Developed countries, which make up one-fourth of the earth’s population, presently consume about three-fourths of the earth’s resources at a rate per capita that is 15 times that of most people in the third world (Trainer 1985, 3). At present the 400 richest Americans have as much wealth as the combined GNP of India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh where more than one billion people live; the three wealthiest Americans have more income than the 48 poorest countries (Korten 1995, 108). The theory of “catch-up” development is a failure, even by its own standards.

It has become increasingly clear that uncontrolled economic growth is a *cause of* rather than a *solution to* the problems of environmental degradation and global poverty. Instead of making food and goods to supply their own basic needs, the poor are locked into a global system specifically designed to supply the overconsumptive wants of the rich. Not only are more raw materials and goods flowing from South to North than are flowing in the opposite direction, but more capital is also being transferred from South to North through debt repayments than is being transferred from North to South in the form of new loans and development assistance. It is estimated that by following the current development paradigm it would take Sri Lanka, for example, 902 years to catch up with the fully developed nations; the 49 poorest countries, including Kenya, India, and Peru, would never catch up (Kassiola 1990, 255). On the other hand, if the overaffluent reduced their per capita resource consumption at least 80%, the problem of global poverty could be overcome within a mere decade or so (Trainer 1985, 248–249).

Reducing overconsumption on such a scale does not mean that we must go back to living in caves; rather it means that in a world of ecological limits parity between rich and poor at levels of material affluence that both

meet basic human needs and are ecologically sustainable cannot be achieved through more economic growth but only by sharing resources more equitably — not just by redistributing wealth but also by dismantling an exploitive global system which permits a minority of the world's people to enjoy wealth and luxury by forcing others into dehumanizing poverty, creating unjust inequalities, and destroying the environment. In the words of a popular slogan, the rich must learn to live more simply so the poor can simply live.

Neoliberal arguments that free trade and the creation of a global market increase prosperity for *all* are patently false. Current trends toward deregulation simply allow large transnational corporations, which control as much as half the world's assets and which by definition do not belong to any country, to act in their own interests rather than for the public good by avoiding any form of democratic political control. The argument that giving freedom to transnationals “creates jobs” is belied by the fact that jobs are actually being lost through restructuring at the same time that executive salaries soar. In the 1970s the average American CEO made 35 times more money than their companies' lowest paid worker; by 1998 that figure had soared to 419 times more (“CEO Pay in '98: Insanity Marches On” 1999, 3).

Transnationals frequently close down operations in first world countries, leaving behind a wake of unemployed workers and devastated communities, only to reopen them in third-world countries where wages are lower, environmental regulations are lax, and taxes are negligible. Globalization portrays itself as promoting peace and international understanding when in fact it simply recreates on a global scale the same Dickensian working conditions which labor unions in the developed countries have spent more than a century fighting against. Nike shoes sell for as much as \$135 in the U.S. but cost only \$5.60 to make in Indonesia, where workers are paid as little as 15¢ an hour, housed in company barracks, subjected to mandatory overtime, and not permitted to strike or form unions; the \$20 million basketball star Michael Jordan received in 1992 for helping to advertise Nike shoes was more than the entire annual payroll of the Indonesian workers who actually produced them (Korten 1995, 111).

From a sociological perspective it is not accurate to divide the world geopolitically between a “rich North” and a “poor South.” A more accurate analysis would be a class analysis which recognizes that there are elites in both the North and South who benefit from free trade and non-elites in both the North and South who are hurt by it. Free trade allows wealth to be concentrated in a small number of large multinational corporations (the capitalist equivalent of Marxist-style “central planning,” although it is corporations rather than governments which control wealth and decision-making). The alternative is a decentralized economic model based on local production for local consumption, with local democratic control over the economy.

### **Issue #3: Democratic decision-making**

Proponents of free trade argue that free trade is in everyone’s interests and should therefore be supported by governments throughout the world. Opponents argue, however, that free trade simply reflects the interests of global elites in both the North and South while working against the interests of ordinary citizens in both spheres. The global market economy is dominated by an elite minority of investors and corporations, who in the pursuit of their own profit and gain have the power to shut down entire economies, as evidenced in the “Asian economic meltdown” of 1997. Only an estimated 5% of the \$1.5 trillion traded daily on global currency markets is used for productive investment; the remaining 95% is speculation, allowing those who contribute absolutely nothing to the production of goods and services to become billionaires while the situation of the workers who actually produce those goods and services continues to deteriorate (“The Global Economy — The Facts” 2000, 24–25).

Business interests have also coopted many mainstream environmental groups through financial donations and board memberships, as well as many international forums for environmental debate, such as the Rio Conference and the Kyoto Protocol. Largely under pressure from corporate lobbyists, the Kyoto Protocol, for example, called for the United States to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by a mere 7%, despite the fact that scientists have recommended reductions of 60–70%. The U.S. Senate found even this

miniscule amount unacceptable, voting 95–0 against ratifying the treaty (Gelbspan 1999).

There is the widespread impression that people are more concerned with material prosperity than with environmental issues. In fact, a 1995 Gallup Poll indicated that two-thirds of the Americans surveyed agreed with the statement that “protection of the environment should be given a priority, even at the risk of curbing economic growth.” Other surveys have indicated that a majority of Americans want the government to do more to protect the environment, through increased government expenditure and tighter regulations, even if taxes are increased and prices become higher (Beder 1997, 233). By failing to do more to protect the environment, politicians clearly reflect the interests of corporations more than they do the concerns of the majority of Americans.

Global institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization also do not reflect the democratic interests of the majority. There is ample evidence that countless development projects undertaken by the World Bank benefit elites in both the North and South and actually make conditions worse rather than better for the poor (Danaher, 1994). The purpose of the IMF is not to “help poor countries” but rather to make sure that elites in poor countries are able to pay back their debts to elites in rich countries. Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) simply shift the burden onto the backs of the poor, however, through cuts in government welfare, price increases, higher taxes, and the like.

Similarly, the World Trade Organization is ruled over by unelected officials who nonetheless have the power to overturn democratically enacted laws on the grounds that they impede free trade. England is obliged to import soccer balls made in India by child labor. The U.S. is obliged to import tuna from Mexico caught with ecologically destructive drift nets. “Freedom” is equated by the advocates of free trade with the freedom of corporations to produce whatever they want and consumers to consume whatever they want, with no consideration being given to how the products are actually made. When citizens attempt to democratically persuade their governments to enact strict health, safety, labor, and environmental

standards and regulations, they are accused of being “against freedom.” By seeing freedom exclusively in economic terms, however, the advocates of free trade in fact are denying the political freedom of individuals to democratically determine the rules by which their societies will be governed. It is precisely in the political realm, however, that civil society can and must attempt to exert its influence.

Because citizens have been excluded from the decision-making process, they see themselves as having no alternative but to take their message to the streets, as they did in Seattle. It is unfortunate that the mainstream media focused so much attention on the destructive acts of a small minority at Seattle — which in any event were not supported by the vast majority of the demonstrators — while they have systematically avoided reporting on the mass destruction of the environment and human well-being caused by globalization and free trade. The public remains for the most part uninformed about the reality of the situation, and if the truth were known, there would undoubtedly be more support for the demonstrators’ cause among the general public.

The media, dominated as it is by the dictates of corporations which own, advertise in, and influence its content both directly and indirectly, fails to give the public an adequate view of the current social and ecological crisis. Television carries hundreds of advertisements for automobiles, for example, but little or no in-depth reporting on how automobile use depletes natural resources, increases air pollution, and contributes to global warming. Public opinion is further manipulated through public relations and “greenwashing” campaigns that downplay the antisocial and antienvironmental behavior of corporations while allowing these same corporations to portray themselves as socially concerned and environmentally sensitive. As a result people are lulled into a false sense of security that most of our current social and environmental problems can be solved simply through more economic growth, technological advances, and “free trade” policies — strategies which in fact simply allow corporations to conduct business as usual and do nothing to change the systemic problems of the current world order.

## Conclusion

The present system is undoubtedly not one that would be freely chosen by an informed global citizenry and, in fact, can only be defended through military force and excessive military spending which keeps citizens in their place and further channels precious resources away from humanitarian concerns. The discrepancy between the promises and the realities of global capitalism are as great as the discrepancies between the promises and the realities of communism, and as citizens become more aware of the truth and see how the system actually works, the “fall of capitalism” could turn out to be even swifter and more spectacular than the “fall of communism.”

One of the chief tasks for intellectuals and academics, therefore, is to clarify what our options are and to reflect on what kind of social, economic, and political order should replace the current system. While this task is by its very nature controversial, precisely because it challenges the power of the elite minority which benefits most from the present system, the factual objective evidence is overwhelming that the present system is ecologically destructive, detrimental to human well-being, socially unjust, and inherently antidemocratic. What is needed, therefore, is a new perspective which exposes the truth about the present system and envisions a new social order which provides for the human needs of all in an egalitarian and environmentally sensitive manner.

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