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The Golden Straightjacket is out of Style

LACEY GERMANA

URS 2000: Growth and Change in Urban Society, Spring 2015

Nominated by: Dr. Hyeseon Jeong

Lacey Germana is a Psychology major in the College of Math and Science. She is a passionate student and a proud mother. All her goals include bettering herself and helping others. Her gifts to share are, creativity, compassion, and empathy.

Lacey notes:

The purpose of this paper was to challenge the current state of capitalism and to add perspective to the unsustainable nature of the profit motives behind it. This paper and assignment helped teach me the importance of progressive change.

Dr. Jeong notes:

Ms. Germana induces from Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* the discrepancy between the rhetoric of globalization as the process of building a harmonious multicultural global society and the political economy of globalization as the process of integrating national economies into a hierarchical global chain of command. Her review well summarizes the main argument and logical framework of Friedman's book and responds to it with bold but thoughtful critique.

To be utterly honest, I found Thomas Friedman's, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* to be an incredibly superficial and biased portrayal of the phenomenon of Globalization. His shallow, capitalistic views, along with the outlandish amount of name dropping and bad analogies, continuously disappointed me throughout the book. I found many points of this book to be unsupported, egotistical and just down-right, wrong. Friedman's "all or nothing" views on globalization and free-market capitalism are conceptualized solely from an Americanization type perspective, totally lacking a *globalized* point of view.

After reading Friedman's interpretation of globalization, I felt like Friedman's main objective was to shove Western outlooks down his reader's throat. I got the vibe from Friedman that he was trying to convince his readers that everyone needs to ditch their "olive trees" and jump in their capitalism fueled "Lexus." If you don't, then you might as well forget about your significance, or survival, in the world as we know it. All Friedman's opinion translated to me was, hey everybody, let's just homogenize the entire world into one big America. It's the *only* thing that will work. I found this to be entirely unrealistic and unsustainable. Ultimately, I'd like to make a broad stance and argue against Friedman's clearly pro-globalization and pro-capitalistic views. Throughout the book, I felt an arrogant tone from Friedman that tended to *glorify* the phenomenon of globalization and the capitalistic market and shame any nation that decided to follow another path. I felt that Friedman failed to capture the realistic nature of the *negative consequences* of globalization. I would like to use this essay to argue against some of Friedman's pushy, adoring attitudes towards globalization and explain why I feel that every nation does *not* need to be pressured to put on this so-called "Golden Straightjacket" that Friedman so heavily pushes as a necessity in Chapter 5. Though there are a vast array of cons associated with globalization and the free-market, I'd like to focus solely on the economic, ethical and environmental factors.

One of the most predominant cons associated with globalization is undoubtedly the rising trend of unequal distribution of wealth. In Chapter 5, Friedman makes the claim, "When it comes to the question of which system today is the most effective at generating rising standards of living, the historical debate is over. The answer is free-market capitalism" (Friedman, 1999, p. 86). In my opinion, this remark *only* applies to wealthy nations, including America. I'd like to argue that free-market capitalism only sets the stage for an

even larger disadvantage for developing countries, simply because they are unable to compete with the “big guys” in the even playing field that globalization generates. This, ultimately, continuously perpetuates inequalities, allowing the rich to be richer and the poor to be even poorer. Even if a developing, free-market nation begins turning out skilled or educated people, those skilled workers are more likely to migrate and work in a more developed and wealthy nation, with more job opportunities. Friedman’s cheerleader attitude on this issue just seems greedy and morbid. I cannot help but think he is severely lacking any sort of empathy or compassion towards the people who are unmistakably suffering from the consequences of globalization and capitalism. I feel that Friedman is just so gung-ho on the capitalistic ideology that *he* may be prospering in, that he fails to realize that it is not in the best interest for the *entire* world. This leads me to my ethical reasoning.

Another negative side effect of the free-market and globalization is the amount of exploitation that more underdeveloped nations are undergoing at the expense of wealthy corporations. A good example of this would be outsourcing. In many of these outsourcing situations, big corporations use this as an excuse to take advantage of other countries by using their workers as cheap labor, which usually involves neglect of safety regulations, inhumane working conditions, and child labor. All of these horrific circumstances seem unimaginable to the everyday American and maybe that’s why there seems to be this illusion that capitalism is superior. It seems to be a bad case of, out of sight, out of mind. According to Friedman, free-market capitalism is the only rational solution, but what logical sense does it make to settle on a system that is so flawed and devastating to so many? Just because some people cannot literally see the inhumane standards that capitalism and globalization perpetuates, does not mean that we need to pretend it’s not happening. It is simply immoral.

Not only is globalization and capitalism affecting a large number of people in a negative way, it is also reaping havoc on our environment. How is it even remotely plausible to think that the entire world can live as aggressively capitalistic consumers and still be able to sustain a healthy environment? I believe that many highly urbanized and capitalistic societies have begun having a serious disconnect with nature. In Chapter 10, *The Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention*, Friedman uses the unnatural company of McDonald’s as a symbol

of peace that has been brought about by Globalization. I happen to have an entirely contrasting perception of McDonald's. Rather than symbolizing peace and war-free zones, I find the spreading of McDonald's to be a great representation of greed, unsustainability and disconnect. Rather than praising the spread of companies that are selling toxic, unnatural products, I would like to point out the extreme volatility and danger that the selfish habits of some major corporations are using. The strain that most large corporations put on the environment is downright alarming. The amount of consumption that a capitalistic society uses will be the end of the earth as we know it, unless we find a more sustainable solution that allows us to reconnect with the earth. Global warming and climate change should be priority over profit, and the current capitalistic and globalized world we live in today will not preserve this wonderful planet we live on. A very wise Indian environmental and anti-globalization activist named Vandana Shiva (2016) said, "It is not an investment if it is destroying the planet." I find those words to be much more enlightening, encouraging, and consciously aware than Friedman's ever will be.

I believe that there is a system out there that will create a wonderful sense of *balance* between achieving a fulfilling standard of living that is also innovative and comfortable while still being consciously connected to the earth and all of the people who reside here. I do not believe that the current state of globalization and capitalism is the system of the future, rather just a system that we will look back on one day and shake our heads at. Maybe instead of everyone conforming to the "Golden Straitjacket," we should all find a system that will allow the *entire* world to thrive and benefit, rather than just a select few.

References

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