

Living is easy with eyes closed: on globalisation and migrants –

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“Let me take you down
cause I’m going to strawberry fields
Nothing is real
And nothing to get hung about...”

Since it was written in the 1960’s, the Beatles’ song has crossed many borders, taken root in many hearts and doubtless means different things to different people. In my own mind’s eye I see plants laden with sweet, ruby-red fruit, unrolling endlessly to the horizon. But try as I might to pick them, they disappear....

Surprisingly, though, I recently encountered the strawberry fields for real. So, let me take you down: to sunny California, producing 1/4 of the world’s commercial strawberries. With a perpetual growing season, fertilisers and pesticides to ensure high yields, fungicides to prevent premature rotting, plus a State Commission (representing the processors) given federal funds for global promotion, in 2001 Californian strawberry-production was valued at \$700 million.

For export trade, there’s even more than meets the eye in related business. There’s cooling the fruit, packaging, air-freighting, (aviation fuel), customs’ quality controls, further transportation, (more fuel consumption), warehousing, repackaging for the supermarkets.

Behold the global, neoliberal economy! Trade almost entirely unregulated, creating vast amounts of business and wealth by whizzing goods and money all around the world. (Creating much more GDP of course than if goods were organically produced and sold directly to local consumers.)

Meanwhile, since US environmental groups have raised concerns about chemical residues in strawberries, the long-term effects of which are unevaluated, scientists also benefit handsomely. The development of GM strawberries with frog genes to survive low-temperature transportation will reduce the use of fungicides affecting profits.

But reports of these concerns won't have reached the ears of foreign strawberry consumers via their corporate media. From out-of-town malls they blithely drive home with their plastic-wrapped purchases, the Beatles crooning from the car stereo:

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Misunderstanding all you see

According to David Korten, author of 'When Corporations Rule the World', one of the greatest distortions of the global capitalist economy lies in the measuring of prosperity. GDP measures gross rather than net domestic product, therefore, as Korten points out, "the depreciation or depletion of natural, social, human or institutional and even human-made capital is not deducted." Thus an oil-spill at sea is 'good' in economic terms, because it generates expensive clean-up activities.

Perhaps it's most wickedly blind to its effect on human beings. Going back to the strawberry fields, those affected aren't just consumers in the North eating potentially carcinogenic fruit. Since the crop is too soft for mechanised harvesting, it's highly labour-intensive. In the 1990's a US Dept of Labour survey found that 85% of US farm workers were immigrants, half of them illegal.

With ageing populations in developed nations and their existing labour-force's distaste for '3d' ('dirty, dangerous, and difficult') work, many industries similarly depend on migrant labour from the South. In California, it's mainly on Mexican migrants that state-subsidised strawberry-businesses depend.

Obvious benefits for these businesses are that illegal migrants have no workers' rights. And the threat of deportation always stifles complaints. In developing countries the absence of legislation protecting workers additionally attracts many Western corporations to open factories there. On the back of sweat-shop labour they thus manufacture products more cheaply than at home, thereby also undercutting trade from other developing nations.

Scrutinised close up, it's all rather reminiscent of slavery. But surely no one makes these migrants come knocking at our door? No one forces Mexicans to pit their wits against the 8,000 strong US patrol deploying helicopters along the 2,000 mile border? Nor to pay 'coyotes' (smugglers) to help them risk life and limb floating across the Rio Grande on tyre inner tubes? Nor were those 58 Chinese migrants forced to enter the UK in the back of a lorry.

Although the answer may seem to be 'No' (few people nowadays are directly press-ganged into slavery, although human trafficking does exist), let's remember that

border controls for people are a contradiction within the rhetoric of the global market. Whereas trade and capital move freely across the globe, the movement of labour is strictly limited.

Lest it be forgotten, Western attitudes have not always been as blindly hostile as today's. In the past migrants have been specifically invited to help boost economies – for example, to the UK, post World War II. And to state the obvious: the US, Canada, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand are nations built largely from migrating settlers.

Our history books inform us about how the West settled new territories, expanded Empires. However, the tendency is to gloss over the fact that this was by genocide, ethnic cleansing, and the appropriation of indigenous people's land. So does the West even account for colonialism's legacy of displaced, exploited people alive today? And in pursuing modern wars to protect the borders and countries they've artificially created – for example Israel and Kuwait – and vested interests there (usually oil), do Western warmongers reflect on how their actions will create even more poverty and refugees?

Whether migrants come seeking asylum or economic benefits, either way the causes of their movement are political. For globalisation directly and indirectly causes poverty, displacement and migrants. Its effect in widening the gap between rich and poor is clearly stated in a 1996 UNDP Human Development Report. Between 1960-1993 the share of global income going to the richest 20% of the world's people rose from 70% to 85%, while that of the poorest 20% fell from 2.3 to 1.4%. Nevertheless, it isn't always easy to see how globalisation does this.

Like the invisible giants of mythology, multinational corporations move virtual money round the globe at the speed of sound and light. Supported by omnipotent, supra-state organisations - such as the IMF and the World Bank - they buy and sell stocks and shares, invest portfolios in developing countries. And because the global market is so deregulated, their activities remain unchecked.

Free-marketeers blindly argue that foreign investment in developing countries is beneficial. However, if instability affects the economy of such a country, that same investment can be rapidly withdrawn, causing chaotic shock-waves and internal collapse. This occurred during the 1997 Asian financial crisis. And Argentines are still experiencing the massive collapse of their country's infrastructure for these reasons.

The reality is that in the global economy deals are struck in hermetic boardrooms with complete impunity. The corrupt governments of poor nations are

talked into foreign loans. And on the floors of stock exchanges in London, New York or Tokyo, split-second decisions are made to buy or sell. All this business affects faraway, unrepresented people. But rarely is its long-term impact adequately assessed.

This lack of assessment became evident in the World Bank's investment in the extensive Narmada dam project in India. After protestors forced it to reconsider, the World Bank withdrew funding, realising that the projections for the water supply were inaccurate. A disastrous impact on the people whose villages were drowned in the dam creation was also documented. Having lost their land and been given inadequate cash compensation by the Indian government, many migrated to India's cities where they now live in miserable slums.

This displacement from rural to urban areas is usually the first step towards migration. With fragmented families and communities, the support that cushions poverty is prevented. Desperate to give their children a better future, parents consider opportunities for them to find a life elsewhere. However, only the young and fit become migrants. Only they are able to withstand the risks of entering the fortress that the West has made of itself.

Knocking at its invisible gates, not all are turned away. Skilled professionals on special contracts and earning predetermined levels of salary are welcome. These economic migrants make the global merry-go-round. For undesirable migrants (poor, unskilled, non-white) detained in Australia, penal colonies await. Whilst in the UK, bureaucrats assessing migrants' cases disperse them into deprived inner city areas where they may be violently attacked by locals, whose hatred is roused by the blatant racism of government and corporate media.

Many migrants may, however, consider themselves luckier than their loved ones left to face the shadow globalisation continually casts on the South: poverty, wars, exploitation. And increasingly, the natural disasters produced by global warming.

As rising tides threaten the North, our eyes are opening to the weather chaos caused by global warming. Although less believed is its link with the excessive production and consumption that the global, free-market economy encourages. And yet, the link's glaringly obvious. A large factor in the creation of fuel emissions augmenting global warming is the long-distance transportation of goods – air-freighting in particular.

Naturally, disasters can affect people anywhere – although poor people, unprotected by insurance, are affected most. Displaced by hurricanes, floods or

drought, environmental refugees are a growing phenomenon. In most cases, however, they're too poor or sick to move. Like those suffering the latest African famine, bones rattling as they hunt mice to feed their kids.

This current famine's connection with natural disaster and globalisation is transparently evident for Malawi. And has even been reported as such in the mainstream British press. Last year floods washed away the topsoil, causing 2002's harvests to fail. Normally, Malawi would fall back on grain reserves lasting five years. However, in 1999, the IMF talked the government into privatising them. But having borrowed from commercial banks, the privatised reserve later couldn't service its debts. So in 2001, the IMF ordered the grain's sale. Tragically, this coincided with the failed crops.

Which leaves me wondering why, as eyes in Western nations open to the truth of global capitalism, an immediate stop isn't put on its trade and institutions, so that the scale of its impacts can be adequately assessed. But on the other hand, in boardrooms, supermarkets and banks, nothing is real. So, I guess it's just strawberry fields forever....

Bibliography

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