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Globalization and Me

The Problem

Globalization is a powerful force ever increasing in these modern times. It has created many benefits and advances for our society but not without consequence. When it comes to the discussion of globalization, what it has brought us, and where it is headed I like to bring a taste of reality to the table. If interventions are not made soon our unsustainable global economy is headed for collapse. With this economy and an ever-rising population also comes an increase in waste; waste we still do not have the infrastructure to properly manage at a global level. Our planet is way too full and little is being done to stop it (Gilding, 2012). “The paradox of a unified global economy and divided national societies poses the single greatest threat for our planet”(Mavropoulos, 2014).

What This Means

“The Earth is full, it’s full of us, it’s full of our stuff, full of our waste, full of our demands” (Gilding, 2012). Our planet is so full it would take 1.5 Earths for our economy in its current state to be sustained; and we still want more (Gilding, 2012). According to Mavropoulos (2014) by 2025 the world population is expected to reach 8 billion and 9.5 billion by 2050. What does the future hold for these populations on a planet already headed for economic distress and collapse? Gilding (2012) emphasizes that we need to recognize we cannot bend the laws of physics to suit our needs. When things are unsustainable, they stop. What are we going to do when the carbon bubble bursts, when the lights go out, when the oil and coal industries fail, and when climate change generates conflict for food and water (Gilding, 2012)?

One major problem that has been created by this global economy is the never-ending and always growing production of waste. In the United States alone 130,000 computers are thrown out each day and 100 million cell phones are discarded each year. It is projected 97% of the population growth we are going to see in 2025 and 2050 is to happen in Asia and Africa, areas with extreme poverty and thus the least capable to absorb these populations and, most notably, their waste (Mavropoulos, 2014).

Environmental laws taxing waste or requiring that waste be recycled in an environmentally responsible way are in place in Europe and other parts of the world. The problem? The costs to simply ship this waste illegally to China is considerably cheaper by comparison (Mavropoulos, 2014). According to Mavropoulos (2014) each year 5 million tons of plastic waste is produced, of that 87% is illegally shipped to China where it is recycled but not in an environmentally responsible manner. It is not just plastic being illegally trafficked however, it is metals, papers, and discarded electronic devices known as e-waste as well.

Pelley (2008) reports our e-waste to contain lead, cadmium, mercury, chromium, and polyvinyl chlorides. These toxins cause brain damage, cancers, kidney disease, and even mutations if not handled properly. Guiyu, China is one town that serves as host to the illegal and unsafe breakdown of our e-waste giving this town the highest levels of cancer causing dioxins in the world (Pelley, 2008). The people of Guiyu, China are suffering; pregnancies are six times more likely to end in miscarriage, and seven out of ten children have too much lead in their blood. These people are under so much economic stress that they must choose between poverty and poison, the poison being the 17th century management of 21st century toxins (Pelley, 2008). If things are already this bad for the people of Guiyu, China, and other areas like it who receive our waste, what will life be like for them in 2025 if we continue down this path?

Possible Solutions

Romm (2013) quotes Elizabeth Kolbert, “It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing.” How do we put a stop to this destructive behavior? Gilding (2012) believes we are capable of extraordinary things but first; we need a good crisis to get going. Hopefully when that crisis finally, or unfortunately, arrives it is not too late to act. Until that inevitable day there are things we can do to help.

We need to make sustainability the standard. We can start by sending a clear message to companies by where we spend our money until sustainability is the norm (Purt, 2014). Ethical supply chains also need to be achieved; we can do that by making sure we know where the products we buy come from and ensure our waste goes where it is properly and safely handled (Purt, 2014). Finally, we can spread awareness by means of any media we choose.

Photographer Burtynsky (2013), for example, captures images of places outside our normal experience like mine tailings, quarries, and refineries that we partake in the output of everyday. Through his photographs he makes visible the contradiction we create when we couple our concern for the health of the planet with our dependence on nature to provide materials for our consumption (Burtynsky, 2013). These images are as horrifyingly beautiful as this global society we have created. They depict what we are capable of on an enormous and impressive scale while bringing to light the consequences of our modern standard of living on our planet.

Our planet is full and overflowing. For us to survive as a society we need to start living in a sustainable way before the system and our way of life collapses. This is our responsibility to future generations and the planet, the only planet we have, to act before it is too late.

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