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World Culture Resists Bowing to Commerce

By JEREMY RIFKIN

When President Bush meets with the other leading industrial nations at the G8 conference in Italy in July, weighty topics, including economic development, trade and Third World debt, will be high on the agenda.

What's equally interesting, however, is the agenda of tens of thousands of protesters from around the world who are expected to gather in Genoa. They want to talk about the various ways global corporations like Monsanto, AOL-Time Warner and McDonald's are undermining cultural diversity and destroying the viability of local communities.

Protests are becoming a familiar part of world political and economic forums. But, although the attention often goes to the relatively few violent protesters, there is a bigger message worth listening to. The fact is, we are witnessing the first stirrings of a cultural backlash to globalization whose effects are likely to be significant and far-reaching.

Local cultures are reawakening everywhere in the world. In India, consumers recently trashed McDonald's restaurants for violating Hindu dietary laws. In Germany, there is a heated debate over what is German culture in the era of globalization. In France, angry farmers uprooted Monsanto's, genetically engineered crops, claiming that they are a threat to French cultural sovereignty over food production. In Canada, local communities are fighting to keep out the giant Wal-Mart retail chain for fear it will replace traditional small-town culture with suburban super malls.

Globalization is changing the cultural landscape in other fundamental ways. In Europe, native languages are giving way to English, the language of globalization, and observers predict an English-speaking continent from Calais to Moscow by the end of the present century.

The increasing disparity between the "haves" and the "have nots" is forcing a great human migration from east to west and from south to north, resulting in a clash of cultures as people wrestle with how to preserve their cultural iden-

ties in an increasingly borderless commercial world.

The official agenda being readied for the G8 summit makes little mention of this emerging worldwide cultural activism, and herein lies the core of the problem. The powers that be have long believed that the world is divided into two spheres of influence: commerce and government. Now organizations representing the cultural

capital. Only when cultures are well developed is there enough social trust to support commercial and governmental institutions.

If the G8 leaders are united in their support of global commerce and trade, the civil society movement groups are just as committed to the idea of preserving local identity and enriching both biological and cultural diversity.

Unfortunately, today, the cultural sector exists in a kind of neo-colonial limbo between the market and government sectors. Only by making local culture a coherent, self-aware political force will it be possible to reestablish its critical role in the scheme of human society once again. Indeed, it may be time to establish a World Cultural Organization to represent diverse cultures around the globe, and give the "WCO" an equal footing with the WTO (World Trade Organization) in international affairs.

Some people worry that a resurgence of interest in local cultures must inevitably lead to xenophobia and ultra-nationalist sentiment. That doesn't have to be so. If people everywhere come to think of their own cultural resources not as possessions to defend but, rather, as gifts to exchange with one another, then the great human migrations of the 21st century could spawn a cultural renaissance and create the conditions for a truly humane globalization of commerce and trade.

The ability of political leaders to identify with and promote both the interests of the civil society and cultural diversity will be critical to ensuring their relevance and viability in the coming century. This was the lesson being taught by the protesters assembling on the streets of Seattle 18 months ago. It's a lesson that is likely to repeat itself on the streets of Genoa in July.

The question is, will the heads of state who assemble in Italy take the time to listen carefully to the message coming from outside their windows? If they don't, the escalating frustration is likely to play into the hands of the growing number of violence-prone extremists, with untold consequences for the world's future.

A new "civil society politics" offers itself as an antidote to globalization.

sphere—the environment, species preservation, rural life, health, food and cuisine, religion, human rights, the family, women's issues, ethnic heritage, the arts and other quality-of-life issues—are pounding on the doors at world economic and political forums and demanding a place at the table. They represent the birth of a new "civil society politics" and an antidote to the forces pushing for globalization.

In the weeks leading up to the G8 conference, we should take a sober look at the differing ideological visions that lie at the heart of the impasse between commerce and government on the one hand and the newly emboldened civil society movement on the other.

The advocates of globalization would argue that free and open trade and an expansion of commercial relationships and activities of all kinds are the keys to a brighter future for all. The flaw in this premise lies in the misguided assumption that commerce spurs culture when, in fact, the exact opposite is more often the case.

The new cultural activists would argue that there is not an example in history where people first create commercial relations and then establish a culture. Commerce and government are secondary, not primary, institutions. They are derivative of the culture, not the progenitors of it. People first establish a common language, agreed-upon codes of behavior and a shared sense of purpose—to wit, social

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