

Spring 5-31-1998

Response to Antón

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Recommended Citation

Powell, Natalie L. (1998) "Response to Antón," *Macalester International*: Vol. 6, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol6/iss1/9>

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Response

Natalie L. Powell

I. Introduction

My high-school economics teacher held up a single number two pencil, an object that people around the world use. He then asked us to describe the path this pencil travels to become a universal writing tool. This seemingly simple question warranted a very complex answer: The pencil's raw materials come from Latin American pine forests, Canadian carbon mines, Brazilian rubber trees, and African metal deposits. These raw materials might be shipped to China, Mexico, or the United States to be processed and assembled, and then to another destination for packaging. Although it is simple to purchase a pencil in this country for less than twenty cents, it is difficult to summarize the global steps that create this writing tool.

Common objects such as pencils can epitomize the impact of globalization on both people and the natural world. For centuries, humans have dominated almost every ecosystem, forming an environment that can hardly be described as "natural." We have profoundly altered the environment and developed a net of global interactions that link the world's nation-states in an economic, social, and cultural movement. These global ties of interchange are not all equal: numerous exchanges remain exploitative, yet all links of the "net" are important to produce the final product. Global needs and wants force countries to harvest resources to dangerous limits, to create monoculture crops, to permanently scar the land by extracting its resources, to pollute the land and water in order to process raw materials, and to use cheaper labor in countries that have few and insufficiently enforced laws. Analysis of this scenario paints an extremely negative portrait of globalization as a destructive and dangerously powerful movement.

Danilo Antón deals with the consequences of globalization.¹ He discusses the "waves" of this phenomenon that have affected the entire world, yet he concentrates primarily on how globalization has impacted and continues to profoundly impact the people and natural world of Latin America. His essay describes the Latin American culture prior to European conquest and the resulting cultural, economic, and environmental changes that still take place due to strong influences from the "outside" world. He believes that contemporary com-

munication trends promote cultural uniformity and weaken territorial states and their governments. He asserts that the twofold effect paradoxically allows subculture elements, once suppressed by governments, to be expressed more freely, thereby leading to local and cultural empowerment. Thus, in Dr. Antón's opinion, empowering the people of Latin America and around the world may provide the answer for resisting or slowing the numerous negative impacts of globalization.

II. Critique

Dr. Antón makes several strong points that I would like to address. It is evident in his summary of a five-hundred-year span that Dr. Antón has a well-founded historical, economic, and social background in Latin America. Although this time period contains enough information and facts to inspire several volumes of scholarly work, Dr. Antón highlights the most important impacts of globalization in Latin America as a whole. His periodization offers three successive waves, each based on a major goal or style, that allow the reader to distinguish between the periods while still comprehending that the waves themselves are linked to one another and are integral to the creation of modern Latin America.

The essay provides a good representation of the negative and positive impacts of globalization. The word *globalization*, especially when used in the context of environmental and cultural issues, generally has a negative connotation. However, Dr. Antón believes that globalization can have positive results as well, such as the decreasing censorship of subcultures, the increased level of communication on all levels of Latin American society, and the subsequent empowerment of local communities. As Dr. Antón states, "the empowerment that is taking place in the now-better-informed local communities is putting them in a better position to choose among the possible alternatives and to protect themselves against more harmful options."²

I believe there are a few shortcomings in his essay, however, the first of which is the issue of generalization. Although all Latin American nations may have experienced similar impacts due to the first wave of globalization, since independence and the Industrial Revolution, each Latin American country has developed in its own way, forming distinguishing characteristics such as language, form of government, national agenda, and social diversity. To lump all nation-

states together is to overlook the richness of their differences. While Dr. Antón does state that “national cultures still exist and are an important asset to regional societies,”³ a precise definition of Latin America still needs to be addressed. Consequently, I am a bit confused at times whether Dr. Antón’s references to Latin America include only nation-states in South America or those of Central America as well. Dr. Antón defines Latin America as the land that Western thought and pressure transformed into its modern form. However, this conception is vague and prompts me to ask if the ambiguous term of Latin America includes Mexico, a nation whose influence on Central and South American culture is paramount. I realize that broadness can be a tool for discussing the range of topics presented in this paper. However, it also carries the danger of overlooking local or regional structures that must be addressed to make progress toward environmental protection and preservation.

Although the historical background offered by Dr. Antón is clearly an important factor in understanding the current status of Latin America, it was my hope that he might offer specific solutions to the problems this region faces. He depends too much on the current and future influence of new communication-based technologies to cure global ailments. Increased levels of information disseminated throughout society as a whole might foster a more educated and environmentally focused global society; however, I am skeptical that this will happen until enough people — people of all classes — have access to this technology.

It is true that the fastest Internet growth in the world in terms of users and sites is taking place in parts of Latin America. The countries with the most developed networks proportional to their populations are Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, and Costa Rica.⁴ However, as Federico Cura points out, since 1992, the Internet in Latin America is being used less for research and education than for business. The business sector is the main user of the Internet in Latin America.⁵ Furthermore, growth figures are only one part of a complex picture. The Internet may be a medium that further divides the rich and poor since participation requires access to a computer, modem, and telephone line. While business-to-business Web commerce has gone global, culture, language, and currency barriers — as well as underdeveloped basic utilities — prevent the Internet from impacting the consumer market to the same extent.⁶ The consumers who explore the World Wide Web are usually the elite and high- and middle-

income earners. People on the lower side of the income scale do not have the power or maybe even the need to cruise the information superhighway. Their concern is far from acquiring the latest technology. Rather, it is meeting the basic needs of life for themselves and their families that governs their existence.

Control of this technology is another issue. As I stated above, it is the business sector that has the real control over the Internet, at least in Latin America. I find it hard to believe that a large percentage of small Latin American businesses have environmental protection as a major part of their agendas. As Dr. Antón asserts, a major consequence of the "communication revolution" is the weakening of national governments. He views this as a positive result. We all recognize that governments have used information to control their citizens, and access to uncensored information can empower citizens. On the other hand, a weakened government most often results in the heightened influence of foreign companies and banks rather than the strengthening of local communities' roles in policy- and decision-making. Furthermore, can weak governments promote environmental protection and preservation when even strong governments have had difficulty? It is the nation-states' leaders who create environmental legislation, and their authority directly relates to the enforcement of these laws. Currently, laws in South and Central American countries are poorly enforced, even in progressive countries such as Costa Rica.⁷ I cannot foresee the weakening of these countries' systems being a victory for the environmental cause.

Communication vehicles such as the Internet do not necessarily lead to less censorship and greater freedom of information. Numerous Third World and even developed nations that have established an Internet system are not free from censorship. Some governments, such as Germany, are attempting to control and censor the Web.⁸ An extreme example is the People's Republic of China, whose government prefers to use its own World Wide Web rather than hook directly into the world's service.⁹ Obviously, the two systems are not the same. And Internet systems that are minimally regulated seem to have become living entities. The information is neither checked for accuracy nor regulated by any central organization. Some may see this as the beauty of the Net. But it is beauty that may become a beast if it leads to untruthful and propagandistic information.

III. Rio +5

In 1992, leading figures from many nations gathered in Rio de Janeiro for the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, dubbed the Earth Summit. Their discussions focused on ways to reverse the accelerating degradation of the environment. Historical documents were signed and a multilateral funding institution was established.¹⁰

Five years after the signing of these documents, carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere continue to increase and forests are still shrinking, especially in Latin America. Obviously, major progress on meeting the Earth Summit's goals has not been made. What is needed to fulfill the goals presented and agreed upon in the Earth Summit in Rio? Jorge Caillaux, chairman of the Sociedad Peruana de Derecho Ambiental (Peruvian Society for Environmental Rights), plainly states that it is time for action and implementation.¹¹ Simple words, but it seems that they are novel in the eyes of legislators. Personally, I am frustrated with the current bantering over the global warming issue. The discussion of global warming is based on the acceptance that excessive industrial and domestic pollution is wrong. However, many individuals seem reluctant to accept scientific facts. Therefore, as Clifton Curtis of Greenpeace International states, "the United Nations, governments, and others need to overcome the denial that human impacts on the environment are real and increasing, and avoid quibbling over details."¹²

How does all of this treaty-signing relate to increases in communication? Globally, numerous governments and businesses are willing to sacrifice the environment for the sake of short-term financial gain and special interests. Since businesses have the greatest control over communication avenues, increased levels of information do not seem to serve as a way to enhance the awareness of the general public. Yet, indirectly it can. Analyzing a business's Web page allows economically privileged consumers to research a company's main objectives without dealing directly with the company. Refusing to support businesses that are not pro-environment, whether it be in their method of obtaining resources or their lack of environmentally friendly products, is a way to "teach a lesson" to organizations that promote further destruction of our planet.

IV. Positive Direction

The events depicted by Dr. Antón concern the destructive elements of globalization in Latin America. So, are there any positive aspects of globalization? I discovered that there are some positive ways of using global structures to preserve cultures and environmental diversity.

A major facet of globalization that has impacted both the people and the natural world of Latin America is tourism. According to present trends, by the beginning of the next century, the tourism industry will employ more people worldwide than any other business.¹³

Traditionally, tourism has been a top-down business: federal and international agencies are involved in the promotion of natural areas and cultural attractions. As the importance of these areas grows, both greater protection of them as well as—and more often—easier access for development and the degradation of cultures and environment are the main results. Transnational companies move into a region, construct hotels, and market products with little regard for the local cultures. Locals are pushed behind the glossy postcard racks and T-shirts. Although new companies provide employment and an increase in overall economic activity, most positions are low paying and the major share of profits usually returns to the company's homeland.

On the other hand, tourism can aid in cultural preservation. Developed at the local level, it becomes a way to preserve cultural heritage with economic success. In Latin America, regional and community-based museums have been constructed to display pre-Columbian artifacts and explain the cultures of indigenous peoples. According to anthropologist Nancy Fuller, these so-called ecomuseums have become community learning centers that link past to present as a strategy for dealing with the future.¹⁴ For example, the citizens of San Vicente, Costa Rica, have successfully built an ecomuseum based on ancient ceramic art. The museum has provided a working solution to a two-part goal: securing a livelihood while reasserting cherished but endangered aspects of their cultural identity. Keeping the control and management of the museum in the community's hands is the real success of this venture.

Tourism can also embody the idea of environmental holism and sustainable development. This type of tourism is often termed "ecotourism." Michael Richards of the Forest Programme within the Overseas Development Institute believes that incentives for sustainable forest management and conservation are promoted by increasing the

protective interests of local peoples.¹⁵ Developing the ecotourism value of endangered land represents one method. For example, La Tigra National Park in eastern Honduras has high ecotourism potential. It was estimated that 10,000 people visit the park annually; however, these visitors paid no entry fee, nor were guides or informational leaflets available. Training local people to be guides, charging an entry fee, and developing other commercial opportunities, such as tourist-focused forest products and local food services, are ways to provide a cash income for this area without environmental destruction. Increasing the economic importance of a forest remaining a natural forest promotes positive attitudes toward forest protection and presents a means of survival tied to the community.

Funding these and other such projects is a huge hurdle. Or is it? The *Economist* recently reported that capital flows to developing countries in 1996 rose by U.S.\$60 billion to a total of U.S.\$224 billion. While these investments cover all economic sectors, funds directed toward environment and energy sectors are growing.¹⁶ Furthermore, William A. Nitze, assistant administrator in the Office of International Activities at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, states that "multinational banks and leading institutions are incorporating sustainability criteria into their financing decisions."¹⁷

Directing international funding toward environmentally focused research poses another means of dealing with anthropogenic stresses on nature. While scientific and technological developments have been used for centuries to destroy the environment and to aid in the domination of people, modern research in the areas of biotechnology and energy focuses on creating technology to benefit the environment.

Bioremediation is one such technology. It uses microbes to clean up anthropogenic messes without the use of chemicals. As Thomas Lovejoy states, it is a process by which "the waste stream of one industry becomes the feedstock of another."¹⁸ During the summer of 1997, I worked at the Center for Great Lakes Studies in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, investigating a microbe that has the potential to metabolically clean the environment.¹⁹ This area of research represents a hope for a future in which the use of chemicals can be minimized and biological processes optimized — a shift from working against the environment to working with it in order to solve problems.

Research and development of new technologies are effective approaches when dealing with environmental degradation since the degradation is tied to the inability of a biological system to support

itself.²⁰ Too often, the economics and social aspects of a problem are addressed without recognition of scientific aspects. We have created a global society and therefore face transdisciplinary problems, yet collaboration between disciplines is thin. Maurice F. Strong, secretary general of the U.N. Conference on the Environment and Development and present chairman of the Earth Council, recommends that building a bridge between science, policy, and international law in the environmental field is a principle step in protecting the environment and making sustainable development a reality.²¹ U.S. Vice President Al Gore recognizes the implication of such an approach within the political arena as well.²² He intends to win a pledge from the Chinese government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in exchange for generous financing to purchase technology that will capacitate the Chinese to meet new environmental standards. Gore believes in the power of technology and states that it is the solution to numerous problems the United States has helped to create.²³

Scientific progress lies not only in technology but also in the establishment of a rich knowledge base. This is particularly so in the areas of ecosystem dynamics in both terrestrial and aquatic systems. An understanding of these systems stems not only from Western ideas about scientific study but also from traditional and local knowledge. Too often traditional and popular knowledge is not considered when one is analyzing the treatment of a specific system.

V. Consciousness

None of the signed statements, created laws, or implemented programs will work until the environment holds a more sacred place in the global mind. Dr. Antón's essay demonstrates that much of the world's insights on the environment are rooted in Western imperial thought. Land is viewed as a commodity and, for many people, developing the land and using it to the fullest extent has become a human right. However, within the last few decades, the global community has begun to realize the damage done to our surroundings and the need to limit or even repair that damage. Some individuals were enlightened long before the majority of the population. For example, Aldo Leopold discussed the need for land ethics in 1949. He writes:

A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the

health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity. . . . The evolution of a land ethic is an intellectual as well as emotional process. . . . To the laborer . . . , the raw stuff on his anvil is an adversary to be conquered. . . . But to the laborer in repose, able for the moment to cast a philosophical eye on his world, the same raw stuff is something to be loved and cherished, because it gives definition and meaning to his life.²⁴

Out of this “raw stuff” civilizations were built. Its diversity was and is the main source of life. Are humans bent, then, on destruction by replacing rich, stable ecosystems full of biotic diversity with monospecific plantations that require an extreme amount of energy to be sustainable? Why have some humans relied on exterminating or subduing other human groups to create a more uniform global culture? These acts seem counter to the natural system. Thus, the most important element in environmental preservation and protection is realizing that human societies are interconnected with the natural environment and derive their means of existence from it.

How do we as individuals reconnect with the environment to make a change? In the United States and in many parts of the world, recycling, although not a perfect solution, is helping to promote environmental consciousness. Anyone who takes the time to recycle clearly sees the amount of “trash” that can be reused or recycled. In the United States, this includes newspapers, shopping bags, soda cans, boxes, glass, plastics, and, most important, toxic substances such as oils and paints. These developments in waste management are now based on the individual’s responsibility to limit waste and increase recycling. As a result, the number of landfills constructed could be decreased, and resources such as aquifers may become less in danger of contamination. That is what Aldo Leopold calls for — a moment to stop and think how one can be a part of conserving the health of the land.

VI. Conclusion

Dr. Antón illustrates the creation of the global culture through the use of military dominance, economic control, and, finally, widespread communication, the last of which may be the greatest agent of cultural uniformity. Access to communication moves beyond the controlling characteristics of previous globalization strategies and focuses on

empowerment through information. Increases in communication build information sources with which we can solve our overwhelming global problems. However, much of the communication technology is increasingly being diverted by the business sector away from education and science. And the business sector cannot be depended upon to solve environmental problems. Furthermore, the weakening of states through increased levels of communication should be avoided if possible. For stressed government structures are unlikely to benefit nature or people.

Several steps have been taken collectively by the Americas and members of the global community to deal with environmental and human issues. However, so far, the entire global community has failed to agree on or implement these treaties. Events on the local level have proved more successful. New scientific research and environmental technology, when combined with other disciplines, present powerful solutions to overwhelming environmental problems. Overall, the crucial step toward environmental conservation lies with the individual. None of the laws, treaties, or programs will be effective unless the individual has more respect for the land and interest in maintaining its health.

Rachel Carson wrote a revolutionary book in 1962. She had become alarmed at the widespread and irresponsible use of poisonous chemicals for agricultural control, and decided that the answer was to inform the American people. The product was *Silent Spring*. Through this book, she helped us recognize the ways in which humankind degrades the quality of life on our planet, and, more important, she demonstrated that individual initiative still counts. I leave you with her words, which can be applied to the environmental problems we face today and the choices we have in shaping our globe's future.

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road—the one "less traveled by"—offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures preservation of our earth.²⁵

Notes

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3. *Ibid.*
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23. *Ibid.*
24. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 258-65.
25. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 277.