Values in Transition:
The impact of slow and uneven growth on public attitudes towards
political and economic systems and towards the values and beliefs that
animate international affairs

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It is perhaps not quite accurate to speak of a "value transition" in contemporary society. Transition implies movement in one direction from a given state toward another. But today, multiple changes in values are occurring simultaneously in disparate and sometimes contradictory directions. The result is not necessarily an array of new values, but a different configuration of values that have long been held.

Before discussing the impact of slow and uneven growth on value shifts, there are two prior questions that bear consideration. One concerns the impact of social change on value configurations. The other is the converse: what is the impact of value shifts on social developments?

It is important to recognize the nature of the historical process in which contemporary changes in values are imbedded. It is one of tremendous turmoil, fragmentation and vulnerability-- in the developing countries in particular. The development process itself generates inequalities that a representative government must mediate. All too often, however, states have failed in or abandoned their mediating roles and substituted repression for social management. Increasingly, therefore, resistance to inequality and injustice manifests itself in opposition to the state.

An important consequence of the twin process of political and economic development is the coming to prominence of new actors, both within the governmental structures of new states (or states that have radically changed their political system) and outside of state structures. Many of the new contenders have no experience of real national politics-- which are necessarily consensus politics-- much less of international politics, which are even more so.

The norms and values that undergird what we loosely call the community of nations evolved in the 19th and early 20th centuries mostly in the context of relations between European states. The new actors referred to above spring from movements and cultures that did not participate in formulating the rules of the international system. It is not

surprising that they feel little obligation to maintain it, given the wide-spread conviction that the international system is dominated by and directed for the benefit of countries that exclude the Third World from decision-making and a fair share of the benefits of interaction.

One additional explanatory factor in the fragility of the international consensus may be that the consensus itself has not drawn sufficiently upon non-Western cultural, legal and religious traditions. The historical reasons for this are comprehensible. International law, for example, grew out of European experience and was codified initially by Europeans. Naturally, it drew upon European moral and intellectual sources. However, its norms might become more firmly entrenched in non-European cultural areas if they were more explicitly related to non-European sources of inspiration. The holy texts of non-Western religions and the legal traditions, philosophies, and customary practices of other cultures abound in implicit or explicit values that imply an ethical approach to political, social and economic issues.

A broader consensus on international issues requires a search for the highest common values that are widely shared despite all the negative, conflictual elements of human societies. All cultures and religions accredit human beings with a moral dimension, and expect to see it manifested in however fragmented and diluted a form. Values such as a respect for innocent life, responsibility toward future generations, protection of the human habitat, an obligation to aid and protect the weak, altruism at least within the family circle and the immediate community-- if not the nation and the world-- are widely if not universally acknowledged in some form. This ethical core is the basis on which a wider consensus can be built.

Growing population densities, improved communications and transportation technologies, the unification of world markets, and above all the powerful means of violence now available mean that the world has become an island; there is no way for us to escape from or avoid the aspirations and ambitions of our neighbors. People who live on islands or in conditions of extreme population density learned long so that in such circumstances is it foolish to seek complete control over one's neighbors or total victory over one's adversaries. The ability to tolerate differences, and to empathize with those who are different is a mechanism for survival as well as a value in its own right.

Social transformation is a complex, messy, uneven, and diverse process, in which the interplay of local, national and international forces obscures any unitary sense of direction. The perspective of the international statesman, or even the national policy-maker, typically takes in only a fraction of what is really going on in this process. It is particularly easy for policy-makers to overlook the non-material facets of people's aspirations and discontents. Yet in a great many cases, governments have been rocked or even toppled by the passion

for intangible but fundamental human values-- a sense of cultural identity, demand for participation, a respect for religion, an insistence on human rights and justice.

A new kind of political spectrum can be discerned, at one end of which are found the superpowers, with their tremendous nuclear and conventional arsenals, along with many middle and smaller powers in which power is increasingly concentrated in the central government. At the other end of the spectrum we find the dissipation and leakage of power despite the formal centralization of power, accompanied by the fragmentation of the polity, the decline of political cohesion, and the emergence of grass-roots groups and movements that are alienated from the political system. They are often without clear leadership or clearly defined purposes beyond the narrow and immediate goals that have brought them into being, and thus are beyond the reach of the usual forms of political manipulation.

People's movements, organized or unorganized, positive or negative, are significant forces in both the North and the South. Some display a grand generosity of spirit, such as the Band-Aid fundraising concerts for Africa and their many spin-offs that have raised money for people in distress-- refugees, financially embattled farmers, the homeless, and so forth. In stark contrast to these are the quasi-fascistic movements that have revived racism, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiments in the industrialized countries.

People's movements have been in the forefront of efforts in, for example, Argentina and the Philippines, to hold government officials accountable for abuses of human rights and for corruption and mismanagement. But they have also been in the forefront of mass violence against rival ethnic groups in India and Sri Lanka. The women's movement, the environmental protection movement, many human rights campaigns, and the most important parts of the peace movement have sprung from the grass roots, and have both led and responded to changes in values.

Popular movements engage themselves not only with concrete issues, but also with questions of morality in public life that governments have found very difficult even to raise, much less resolve. Many governments find popular movements difficult to deal with precisely because they challenge in a fundamental way the received wisdom of so-called experts, and insist on the primacy of intangible values.

We may be coming to the end of an age in which problems have been defined in materialistic terms exclusively, and their solutions sought on that plane as well. We are beginning to see now a reassertion of moral and spiritual values. The Catholic Bishops in the United States have brought that dimension to their statements on the national economy and on nuclear weapons. The Archbishop of Canterbury has been similarly vocal on behalf of the Church of England. The insistence of the Islamic

clergy in a number of countries that Islamic values be explicitly woven into public policy and the social fabric is a political factor of major importance in a number of countries and in international relations.

The impression grows that we are at the end of a long period of secularization. People are beginning to assert that it is impossible for them to realize their full humanity in a totally secularized world where no value is assigned to immeasurable qualities such as rectitude, sharing, mutual obligation, inner peace, harmony with nature and so forth. The resurgence of fundamentalism is only one manisfestation of this process, and it is not in all cases a reactionary impulse. The morality of social and political structures is now being challenged from many other quarters as well.

The progression toward individualism also seems to be reaching a point of diminishing returns. The process of individualization, so successful in releasing enormous creative power, at some point begins to erode the bounds between people, weakening the nation, the community and even the family. It has also, at the national level, eroded the commitment to multilateral co-operation in dealing with pressing global issues. Instead we see increasing evidence of regional and global unilateralism.

It is often simply impossible to know which movements, trends or practices may prove to be significant. Spontaneous, unexpected currents have arisen to alter the course of history in a given area-- such as the Gandhian movement in India, for example. Recent decades have been characterized by profound shifts in the values held by significant groups of people. These shifts, which are both a result and a source of social change, occur simultaneously in disparate and sometimes conflicting directions. Some look back to a revival of traditional values, while others look to other cultural traditions, or attempt to define an entirely new configuration of values.

I have indulged in quite a bit of scene-setting before addressing the specific question of how slow and uneven growth affects attitudes toward political and economic systems and the values that animate international affairs, though some responses to this question are strongly implied in what has just been said.

Slow and uneven economic growth has three major kinds of effects on people's attitudes toward political and economic systems. First, it throws the spotlight of public attention on distributive issues, which are among the most passionately contentious issues in any polity, resting as they do on fundamental moral relations and obligations among members of the community. Such issues are often submerged when a rising economic tide is raising all boats. But when growth slows or halts, the despair, frustrations and rage of the "have-nots" clashes with the fear, reluctance or intransigence of the "haves", and may tear a society apart.

A second effect of slow growth is to accelerate the process of questioning material affluence as a value in its own right. When an economy is racing ahead, it is considered unfashionable or even unpatriotic to ask "where is this leading us?", or "what other values are being sacrificed to the pursuit of affluence?" When the process of economic expansions shows itself to be flawed and limited, it is easier to pose the above questions in retrospect, and to express the moral revulsion that many people feel at the greed, corruption and short-sightedness that often accompany a boom.

A third effect on values of slow and uneven growth is the erosion of the perceived legitimacy of the state, which is expected to defend and advance the material well-being of the people. When it is seen to fail in this task, the state comes under criticism or even attack from minimalists, theocrats, ideologues and others-- as well as from the growing masses of people who are progressively alienated from a system that is unable or unwilling to provide them opportunities to sustain or better their condition. It is this shift in values that most affects international relations.

Whether it is the result of improved communications, heightened expectations, or simple too many years of disappointed hopes, the impoverished masses no longer seem willing passively to accept deprivation and exploitation. Such widespread dissatisfaction with the state or the government is easily manipulated by those-- either within or outside the state structure-- who proffer simplistic solutions, or diversions such as military adventurism, scapegoating or public disturbances. Disaffection that takes the forms of political opposition often provokes defensive reaction on the part of the state apparatus. It may respond to protest with censorship, repression and even murder, thus accelerating a downward spiral of alienation.

Widespread alienation from the government exacerbated by poor economic performance may, however have strong positive effects in some situations. It may persuade the people to throw their support behind an opposition with a positive alternative to offer. The middle and professional classes, particularly, often have a bias for stability, but a prolonged period of slow and uneven growth may persuade them that their own interest lies with change, in common cause with the poorer segments of societies. The process of redemocratization in southern Europe, Latin America and the Philippines was given impetus by the failure of the authoritarian governments to provide a degree of order and prosperity that would compensate the middle classes for the loss of democratic processes. Such a shift in the configuration of values held by the middle class, with change coming to take precedence over stability, is a development of great significance.

What conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing analysis? The cohesiveness of a society does not depend exclusively, or even

primarily, on its laws. Cohesion depends much more on the existence of a general social consensus that the institutions of society are reasonably fair, just and accessible. Without this basic consensus, the rule of law becomes entirely dependent on enforcement, with the police and the army functioning as an occupying force within their own countries. The consent of the governed is not just a morally desirable quality but a practical necessity.

A society that has achieved a workable consensus is not necessarily a society without conflict. It is questionable whether such a society exists anywhere-- it certainly does not exist in the developing countries that are caught up in the tumultuous processes of economic development and nation-building. The crucial question is how to reduce the human cost of the necessary and in many cases desirable convulsions associated with social change. How can the need for change be reconciled with the need for order and the need for justice? The dynamic equilibrium among these three-- change, order, justice-- defines the scope for freedom and the realization of both collective and individual aspirations.

The quality that permits people and institutions to interact with each other in each of the three dimensions without conflict erupting into violence might be termed social resilience. Resilience allows a people to accept change without losing their own cultural identity. Resilience permits faith in a system of justice to be maintained even in the face of flows in the system, so that a single travesty or even a series of them will not bring about rejection of the system as a whole. The concept of resilience is quite different from that of stability. Stability under oppressive conditions means the perpetuation of violence. The interaction of resilience and order bolsters the capacity for adaptation without chaos.

The lack of resilience in any of the three dimensions creates the conditions for violence. Change without resilience leads to alienation and loss of identity. A system of justice without resilience turns predictable human failures into catalysts for polarization. Order without resilience leads to oppression and a corresponding resistance.

Building social resilience is not a task only for the state, though the state can play an important role. But the quality of resilience lies in the much broader sphere of civic culture. A collective commitment to the public good, to managing conflict without violence, depends as much on community groups, non-governmental organizations, religious institutions involving both clergy and laity, volunteer groups, political parties, educational institutions, the media and so forth-- all of which have the responsibility and the capability for nurturing a sense of civic responsibility.

There is no doubt that steady, evenly distributed economic growth is conducive to the development of social resilience. Rapid growth creates strains to which many societies have had trouble adjusting,

even when the benefits of growth are fairly well distributed. Uneven growth is probably more damaging to resilience than slow growth. There are limits to the level of disparity that any polity can tolerate without coming apart at the seams. Finally, extremely rapid growth with increasingly unequal distribution is the combination most likely to undermine traditional values while impeding the construction of a new social consensus on the basis of which the forward movement of a whole society can proceed.

The greatest obstacle to the achievement of social resilience based on an inclusive sense of shared values is the drifting apart of the rich and the poor into two separate worlds. Today, this is a far more complex phenomenon than the geopolitical division of the world into North and South, industrialized and developing countries. Today, the well-to-do in Cairo, New Delhi, Lima and Lagos have far more in common with the well-to-do in Chicago or Paris than they have with the poor in their own countries. The affluent also communicate more easily with each other across national boundaries, via international direct-dial telephones and jumbo jets, than with their poor compatriots. The satellite dish, the video recorder, and the color television allow the rich to envelop themselves in a cocoon of privilege, which insulates them from the harsh realities of the struggle for survival in which most of their fellow-citizens are involved.

For the non-affluent in poor countries, the images of privilege conveyed in the mass media have raised material expectations far beyond the capacity of developing economies to deliver within any remotely equitable framework. These dreams of affluence can come true in the short run for only a tiny minority, and for them only at the expense of equity. Perhaps the most pernicious effect such dreams have is on the nature of individual values and aspirations. Nurtured on the images of privilege, the ambitions of many poor youths turns to escape from, rather than commitment to, their own villages or neighborhoods. Frustration at the inability of the national economy to deliver general prosperity and heightened awareness of inequality within the nation fuel the anger that is behind so much of the turmoil in the developing world.

In short, modern technologies of communication and transportation, to say nothing of a pervasive commercial culture, have aided a new stratification of the world's people into transnational classes that share very little information, experience or common concern. The psychological distance between the strata is in imminent danger of reaching the point where the only form of discourse between top and bottom is violence, punctuated by occasional spasms of charity. To prevent the split between the two worlds from widening is a matter of the greatest practical as well as ethical urgency.