

Competition and Coexistence of the Modern and Not-So-Modern

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Can it be that whereas Charles Darwin and perhaps James Dator believe that combat and competition promote survival and transformation, Petr A. Kropotkin and I think that cooperation is at least as important? At any rate, James Dator's article on malls and future electronic commerce has stimulated related thoughts on the future of commerce and education, retail centers and campuses. These thoughts are meant to widen the discussion to include social issues in electronic commerce and electronic learning. Two of these major issues are individual social interactions and social justice among peoples of the world.

In his article, Dator includes the manageable number of five factors influencing retail commerce. He examined advertising, personal credit, transportation and communication technology and globalization. After analyzing the effects of these on commerce and malls, he suggested three general possible futures: the continuation of present trends, a collapse of the global economy, and a transformation of commerce into a form greatly using electronic communication. Most readers will tend to embrace his thoughts that bet on the future transformations of commerce but not necessarily on the form he seems to accept.

There were matters that caused discomfort; perhaps more the things unsaid than those so well expressed. First, what specific transformation are we talking about? No one knows with certitude what the future holds, but we can offer scenarios and projections, and we do bet on some of them in our investments and plans. So why not be a little bold, knowing like Socrates that we know not? "You pay your money and take your chances," a wise man once said. It's hard to live without commitment. Where should we invest our time, energy and money?

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Why commit to this future rather than that? We should argue and struggle for some and against others. Some persons will wish to alter the free global market form of e-commerce seemingly and widely accepted.

Next and most important, there is a significant factor that seems often absent in studies of retail sales and commerce, namely, the social element. Why is the social dimension including social virtues important? Because that element we'll term sociability caps our existence as the evolved species we are. Because it is the foundation of societies, cultures and civilizations. It makes our relations pleasant, peaceful and just. At the same time, it is important since it stops our lives and existence from being solitary, nasty, brutish and short in the words of Thomas Hobbes. Religions have yet more reasons. Three factors examined by James Dator, namely, transportation and communications technology and globalization, are making it ever more true that we are all in this together. Persons in all regions of the globe are increasingly interacting and having an influence on one another, so that our lives and existence are forming a global society. Thus the social element and social virtues become more significant and must be considered in commerce and other human activities.

This element has been central for all human activities including economic and commercial ones. As James Dator pointed out, we used to buy services and products from people we knew and we did this on a personal level. We dealt with the family doctor and dentist who cared for us, perhaps the private school we attended, the corner Rexall pharmacist, the family with the general store or furniture store, the neighborhood independent grocery store and the town mortician somewhat in that order. Well, many sorely miss that social element in modern life since it has now largely in its not-so-modern forms disappeared and perished. Here it's not only the question of the social lives of individuals in one nation or other but also of the living web of social interactions in the world and among different nations. Social considerations, moreover, can be good reasons to opt for one future over another.

One form the choice for futures with sociability is taking shows in the attempts especially of regions or individual cities to save, strengthen or resurrect it even in transformations. Sometimes this comes to focus in the living economic and social web of a neighborhood, town or city. In Western Europe there was state protection for small retail and service businesses and the centers of towns were kept alive. Now Walmart is making its impact felt and many of the small businesses are hurt and the centers will change. There are moves afoot to revitalize the centers in the States

and in some parts of Europe too. Part of this is helping small businesses while also creating vital residential units and styles in the centers or urban hubs to counterbalance the flight to the edges which had not only economic but social costs. Some of these revitalization efforts are large scale, highly designed projects while others are more grass roots and local. Maybe we could do well to read and consider such books as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs (Modern Library, 1993 reissued edition of the 1961 original), *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* by Joel Garreau (Anchor, 1992) and *Cities Back from the Edges* by Roberta Brandes Gratz with Norman Minsk (John Wiley and Sons, 1998). First there were cities, then there were suburbs and then there were malls. Now like Phoenix there are cities again, albeit with transformed forms and functions. What designs and buildings will enhance their social wealth and wellbeing? What roles will electronic commerce play and what will its effects be on the social and economic fabric?

E-commerce will not displace all retail commerce now or formerly conducted at arms' length and face to face but will coexist with some of these forms. We still have restaurants and food markets and clothing and specialty stores (e.g., auto parts) where we need to be in physical or visual contact with the service or product just before or at the time we purchase it. Some consumers may be merely habituated but there are many things they will simply not consider buying sight unseen or even untested. They include food, eyeglasses, and clothing including shoes for their often unique physiques. There are items that are personal or unique, and besides we need many things rather quickly. So yes, e-commerce will take a larger and larger market share of many products that are easily replaceable or substitutable, and e-marketing will help attract buyers for the unique and personal and not so easily substitutable. Among the former are books, medicines, cleaning products, computers and brand clothing while among the later are homes, investment property, custom shoes and medical services. Even in the later, e-commerce can be of tremendous help in marketing but for a relatively long time sales will be made on a more personal level. Many of the stores, malls and big-box outlets we know now will disappear due to the market share gained by e-commerce. Still I don't see e-commerce as becoming the sole marketing and retail means. In other words, the roles played by e-commerce will be fairly rich but they will leave niches for other marketing and sales.

The foregoing claims may be 100% in keeping with James Dator's thoughts and may just be filling in with general brush strokes what a trans-

formation will look like as it proceeds over the next decade or so. Still it is only part of the picture. How is it that the wider social considerations are overlooked?

Commerce and e-commerce now constitute a socio-economic web that encompasses the entire globe, relating the inhabitants of one society with those in other differing ones. We had been addressing solely the economically developed world, largely Western Europe, North America and Japan. Over the entire globe, the picture changes. Consider the following information from the web site - <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Poverty.asp>. Nearly three billion people comprising about a half of the world's population live on less than 2 U.S. dollars a day. We have entered the 21st century with nearly one billion people unable to read a book or sign their name. A few hundred of the world's millionaires own as much wealth as the poorest 2.5 billion individuals.

What is commonplace for the wealthy may be an impossibility for the poor of the world. There are many individuals now living in poor nations who will never engage in

e-commerce since they cannot own a computer and be on the Internet for two reasons. Their countries do not have the telecommuting infrastructure. The individual residents do not (i) possess the money for what it takes for Internet access through a provider, (ii) have electricity or (iii) own a computer. They are often engaged in a struggle for survival that consumes all their resources.

As time and commerce have progressed over the last two hundred years, the gap between rich nation-states and poor ones has widened. Reportedly the ratio of wealth in the wealthy nations to the poor ones was about 7 to 1 in 1820 and about 72 to 1 by the end of the 20th century. Will e-commerce help the poorer individuals and nation states economically? In fact it may make matters worse. A significant problem in poor nations is often the flight of capital, and e-commerce may make the flight easier. If the poor do buy over the net they will likely be buying from suppliers and distributors in the rich nations. Thus their money and their countries' capital will be going to the richer nations. We know that capitalism is disposed to open new markets. How ironic it will be if firms in the States, France and Japan are selling goods and products made in some African and Asian countries to inhabitants of those countries over the worldwide web. Inhabitants of the poorer nations may even be using credit or charge cards from financial institutions in the developed countries further contributing to capital flight.

In addition to the economic and commercial elements, there are the attendant social ones including the demands of justice. As Aristotle observed over twenty-three centuries ago, not only are we social beings but human excellence is characterized by virtues some of the chief ones being moderation, courage, wisdom and justice. Justice particularly governs our interactions in society and questions of justice are often social ones. It's an open question whether the ruling assumptions of economic neo-liberalism, which hold the market is supreme and that the less governments interfere with commerce the better things will be, can give way to measures that use the net and e-commerce to further global justice, or whether it will use them to increase the well-being of those holding the present advantage. Wider access to unbiased information will be a good thing, but ungoverned e-commerce may widen the gap between rich and poor individuals and nations. Then in fact it might hinder a transformation to a more just global society, and prolong the status quo of rich and poor.

In the related area of education, as we become enamored with electronic learning, we can not only exclude the poor but too easily overlook the social elements of education in general as some do in commerce. Dator made some remarks concerning education and stated he would not recommend the construction of new buildings. Why not? He gave some reasons and some new buildings should not be built, but we know the old and present structures get old and suffer from physical and functional obsolescence. Populations move and new facilities follow them. Furthermore, it seemed that the social functions of institutional education were given scant value. Just considering universities, there are at least four central and one peripheral role that constitute their functioning: teaching-learning, research, social/community service, social cultivation and peripherally entertainment. So we need: classrooms, lecture halls, media centers, libraries, clinics and hospitals; laboratories, observatories, greenhouses, aquariums and other research facilities; auditoriums for drama and music, public lecture space; gathering places (the original function of casinos) for social interaction; and finally those great entertainment centers, the football fields and basketball field houses. That social element and its functions are very central to all of education.

"Man is a social animal," is a view framed by Aristotle but shared by most who observe their fellows and live among them. Sociability is one of our proper attributes and one that makes our lives just and enjoyable. That is likely why Aristotle made what might otherwise seem a petty characteristic, for example, wittiness, a virtue or human excellence. There

are other excellences such as courtesy and sportsmanship we unfortunately do not regularly consider virtues. It seems, moreover, that many virtues are best learned in personal interaction, face to face in the living and working spaces of towns as well as in the classrooms, meeting places and sports facilities of educational institutions.

You may think the social dimension of education is presently diminished or at least greatly changed from what it was formerly. Sometimes it seems schools and universities are not just much more businesslike but much more like modern businesses. It is true that the university has gone through as many stages of development as commerce until it is now often largely itself commercial and controlled by commercial interests. In the medieval ages that marked their beginnings in Europe, the Church had control of the universities, and then with the Renaissance and Enlightenment control passed to denominations and to the states whether German, French or American, and then to smaller units of government and to private organizations. Now it is passing to businesses and corporations. Motorola, banks and other corporations have and control their own universities and schools. There are for-profit schools such as the University of Phoenix and Western International University run for profit by the Apollo Group whose stock you can buy. Many public, governmental schools also emphasize vocational and career development and so focus on developing a corporate workforce. Thus education has been commercialized in many ways. In addition, administrators and boards often hold the governing paradigm, a commercial mindset, of seeing students and corporations as 'the market' and information as their product.

Along with this, there has been a shift from education as personal and social development to education as the transfer of information for working in a technological environment. The Church through education socialized individuals to be believers and virtuous church members. The states wanted productive and contributing citizens. Having wise consumers and efficient, successful members of commercial society is often the present hoped-for outcome. I suspect that learning through the Internet is more profitable for the latter although it will play an increasing role in what remains of the former functions. It may even be developed by some to help individuals attain free thought and free lives - the goal of 'liberal' education. At least it has that potential if developed along those lines. Hopefully it will be.

James Dator and each individual has memories. I remember some of the persons I consider to have been critical in my education. Many were

university professors, others leaders outside academia, and then there is my own father. We could likely all think similarly. Probably like many students, I learned more in a short seminar with Lewis White Beck on Immanuel Kant than any amount of Internet learning would have produced. He had two wonderful qualities: he was able to take even a foolish statement and turn it into something of value, and he was a genius at using questions. As soon as someone answered his questions, he laid misunderstandings bare in a moment and pointed students in more fruitful directions. His was a search for wisdom. Education does contribute among other things to the development of Aristotle's classic virtue of wisdom. How to attain an education poses a question. Granting that e-learning places responsibility largely where it belongs, namely, on individual students, there are still questions of whether and when and for what it is an appropriate means.

Of course, we are only in the infancy of Internet learning and maybe we will have interaction or simulated or virtual interaction with great artists and intellects, Iztak Perlman and Lewis White Beck, maybe even virtual Mozart, Kant and Einstein some day. We may have master classes in music, painting, philosophy, physics or almost anything via the web or net or whatever wherever we may be. The potential is mind-boggling and will hopefully be personally transformational.

At the same time, three possibly threatened foundational and common elements of any education are etiquette, courtesy and collaboration. As we are indeed social animals, these are quite basic virtues. Some fear that without the face-to-face interactions sociability will become almost a virtue. Being separated from or doing away with the social element in commerce and in education may be appropriate for a lot of buying and selling and for a lot of information transfer. It may also help contribute to a "clockwork orange" world where sociopathologies are ever more common and threatening. Whether this is the case or not is a factual issue, and we need to design and conduct empirical studies to test the claims. Yet there are things we can do until the facts are in.

To take a measure of charge over our future, we can pay a lot of attention to promoting civil, social interaction with etiquette, courtesy and collaboration in commerce and education, and other fields. Two loci of that are the town center and the university. Part of cultivating the realm of the heart and social interaction along with that of the intellect may well be the cost of planning and growing new buildings and other spaces in city-village centers or hubs and in universities which are themselves real

hubs of human interaction in teaching-learning, research, artistic presentations, social development and sporting events..

Transformations in commerce, education and other areas may consist of newer and strikingly different forms and functions without the loss of all the old structures or functions. Perhaps the brain serves as an analogy. There are the hind brain, the limbic system and the cerebral cortex, respectively giving rise to reptilian, mammalian and primate functions. All exist together in the primates. So too there are genes and organs, individual organisms, smaller groups and larger societies. The gene societies, familial ones and tribes and states and the world and eventually beyond with all developed one upon the other. E-interaction can actually be one more social development built upon those that serve as its precedents. One thinks of John Stewart's hypothesis of evolution leading to greater and more complex cooperation and organization in his recent book "Evolution's Arrow." No doubt our energy, transportation and electronic technologies are effecting transformations. A transformation, however, can grow from social interaction and need not obliterate what it came from, but in a way preserves it. I think that Hegel held this in his concept of *aufheben*, for those who like the dialectic as a paradigm. Our shared consciousness develops ever newer and more useful concepts and forms for our changing lives but in this progression of transformations much of the old is preserved in one way or another. In any case, it is a detailed story but not necessarily one of the new devouring the old.

The above comments are at least enough to tie together in one short commentary or essay. It is a try to state what in James Dator's talk occasioned considerable discomfort, the unspoken and unexamined roles of the social element in e-commerce and e-learning. It also tries to join him in taking some control of our future and in sketching a very general picture of a possible future or two, while considering some of the wider social dimensions involved including our local and international interactions. Quite a few concerned persons will place their bets on a future that preserves sociability, promotes virtues including justice, and transforms through cooperation as much as through combat and competition. There is ample room for detailed thinking about what the outcomes can be and what forms their efforts can fruitfully take.