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A ROUNDTABLE ON GLOBALIZATION

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Gianni Vattimo, Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty are in no need of an introduction. They are three of the world's most discussed philosophers, leading in the fields of hermeneutics, pragmatism, and moral philosophy. They are also influential public intellectuals commanding a broad audience throughout North America and Europe. This roundtable discussion on globalization was conducted in Italy in 2001 months after the inauguration of George W. Bush for his first term as president and months before the events of September 11. While it primarily concerns the economics of globalization, each of the interlocutors also identify some worrying trends they see in the early months of the Bush administration such as the unquestioned faith in the neo-liberal economic policies of free trade, the disregard for world opinion, and the inordinate influence of the military-industrial complex. Their conversation stands as a reminder of an earlier promise from then candidate Bush that he would conduct foreign affairs with a greater sense of humility. Since September 11th, however, he and his administration have harnessed and manipulated the politics of fright to tremendous effect by waging a perpetual war on terror in the name of

democracy. With the possible exception of various regimes in Latin America, the Left has been unable to mount any meaningful political response. Vattimo, Rorty, and Taylor indicate here how the seeming impotence of the Left was and remains a cause for great concern and a matter demanding the most rigorous political debate and philosophical scrutiny. It is with that challenge in mind that the *JCRT* proudly offers up this important and still timely exchange for our readers.

We would like to offer our thanks to Giuseppe Iannantuono for making the original Italian version of this roundtable exchange available to us, Luca D'Isanto for his translation, and Santiago Zabala for his invaluable assistance in countless ways.

Finally, we must acknowledge with regret the very recent death of Richard Rorty on June 8, 2007. The music producer Brian Eno eulogized in *Slate* magazine's tribute to Rorty: "I have treasured his witty, urbane, and generous voice, and followed his writing assiduously since first hearing about him in the late '80s. He was the first philosopher whose thinking really changed my mind. It has stayed changed. My hope was that now, of all times, he might be heard more widely, that he might change some other minds." <<http://www.slate.com/id/2168488/>>.

For related materials from the *JCRT*, see the following:

- Diane Johnson's review of Daniel Cohen, *Globalization and its Enemies*, in the present issue.
- Phillip Larrey, review of [Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, edited by Santiago Zabala](#), from the Spring 2005 issue of the journal.

VATTIMO: President Bush holds that globalization helps the world's poor, but they are not persuaded by him. Neither are those who rally against globalization—the so-called “people of Seattle”—who do not really represent the poor. Not to mention the underdeveloped nations, who are also not very enthusiastic about Bush or about his view. Why? In theory economic trade should bring about benefits and advantages for all, since this is what happened with Western capitalism: it expanded borders, increased production, wealth and so on. Why, then, are we so dubious?

TAYLOR: The example of the great industrial process of the nineteenth century shows that while industrialization may be good for all in the long-run, in the short-term it may have catastrophic effects on most of the population. Among those negatively affected are those whose jobs are most at risk because the great industries might be shutting down soon. This situation could continue for quite a

long time and a lot of people simply will not be there any longer to enjoy the positive benefits associated with long-term effects. This is why we are comfortable with an economic politics of small assistance for all. In this respect, history demonstrates the absurdity of the former position, and the truthfulness of the latter.

VATTIMO: I share your point of view. Indeed, I believe that the developed nations should be more favorable to this project of social welfare, even though they are dissatisfied with it.

RORTY: I'd like to start by making two points. First, as Taylor has said, the history of Western capitalism demonstrates how hard the creation of new wealth can be on the poor. Recognizing this fact, some of the Western democracies have created social safety networks. The problem is that we have no equivalent for the national government at the global level, no government charged with the welfare of the species as a whole. It would have been better if economic globalization had taken place only after the creation of a world federation and of a supra-national government that would try to create a global welfare state.. Unfortunately, the global economy arose before we had set up what Tennyson once called the "Parliament of Man, the federation of the world." My second remark is that in a globalized labor market the standard of living of the workers in the old democracies will sink dramatically. We thus run the risk of a social revolution that will endanger democracy even in countries where it has long been established. .

VATTIMO: In sum, the question of globalization, albeit utopian, is also and foremost a matter of democracy. Before the advent of economic globalization we should have put in place a world federation, with the awareness that in the past the economic processes unfolded in a different manner. The European Union, for example, has begun to organize itself as an economic community with respect to its most important substances like coal and steel in order to move closer, recently, to a form of economic unity, which should eventually lead to political unity. I realize, though, that the single currency, and its weakness since it was first introduced into the European Union, seems to depend on the fact that people do not believe in it, because they do not sense a strong political entity behind it. We cannot continue to act as if economic development were a natural fact. This situation reminds me of Nietzsche's statement to the effect that "so far there must have been a few supermen." True, the present technology of communication between governments and non-governments makes older models of development look too 'natural.' We need a stronger and more effective political unity; otherwise it is a factual given that since the multinationals make huge earnings they cannot support a stronger political action on the part of the European community. So we find in the foreground the question of how democracy is to be realized. It is an extremely pressing question insofar as it bears upon the political evaluation of contemporary movements: the unpopular

image of the Seattle movement as a group of anarchists who destroy everything or into groups of people who, like hippies sing songs, has been produced by same media that serve the interests of multinationals.

TAYLOR: We need a world government, so we should consider two ways of proceeding: 1) We should change the general rules of international institutions such as WTO (World Trade Organization) or NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), which state that in matters of regulation of the political ecology it supports governments' agenda. I can understand why governments might use ecological reasons, but they go too far in protecting the products of manufacturing companies. These demands should be made by a democratic movement that belonged to the same companies to pressure governments into withdrawal. The demonstrations in Seattle, Quebec and Geneva were a positive factor, for the simple reason that they were put on an agenda precisely with a view to pressure governments. This demand should be accompanied by a stronger and continuous drive to ensure the publicity and transparency of negotiations. The famous chapter 11 of NAFTA, for example, is the outcome of an absolutely secret negotiation. This is undoubtedly just an example. When considering the WTO and the proposals concerning the environment, we should not take the arguments at the level of abstraction. Rather, we should consider the equivalent models of commercial development for depressed areas, too. And all this needs to be regulated and organized appropriately not only by international organizations but also and foremost by means of international pressure. For example, if anarchical fringes continue to act, it means that a politics of control needs to be enforced. Another example, in Canada, is the organized movement of citizens and its related concern with the politics of consumption, which was expressed in recent years by means of selected boycotts. It constitutes a concrete response on the part of the ecological movement to the struggle for the politics of lumber.

(There are two arms and two fists, hence left and right. The right pushes governments to propose new regulations, the left (if the right fails) acts. The boycotts targeting certain companies could bring about some progress).

VATTIMO: I was thinking of NGOs, above all, as they work with government funds, even though more often than not they look like small bureaucracies. Indeed, recent statistics have demonstrated that 70 per cent of budgets produced by NGOs is spent by CEOs for travels. The problem is the redefinition of the meaning of democracy by means that ought to be placed in the hands of citizens. To be sure, citizens' organizations are not always democratically organized, in the sense that they represent only a minority, yet they still stimulate others to intervene and participate in the democratic process. For example, if someone is in disagreement with my organization's boycott of IKEA, s/he can organize a campaign with the support of the public. This is, perhaps, a way of creating democracy without depending exclusively on the propaganda of the electoral

mechanism.

RORTY: I would like to see the left-wing parties in the old democracies consult with one another and make an effort to elaborate a common program. Such a program would state what the politics and regulations of the WTO and of the International Monetary Fund (FMI) should be. If there were to be simultaneous campaigns by the left in many different countries demanding very specific changes in matter of regulations and politics, they might have considerable success. One difficulty, though, is that the Democratic Party in the United States cannot allow itself to be seen as affiliated with left-wing parties elsewhere. Should the American public see the Democrats as allied with the social democratic parties of France and Germany, the Democrats would lose lots of votes. America is becoming ever more isolationist. So the left-wing party of the most powerful nation in the world cannot show itself to be engaged in any form of cooperation with leftist parties in other countries. I don't really know how to overcome this difficulty. However consumer boycotts might have some effect. The American trade unions, in the 1930s and 1940s were able to convince millions of people not to buy clothes that were not labeled "union product." If we had similar labels for imported textiles, and for other goods as well, the boycotting of products without union labels might lead to good results.

VATTIMO: Undoubtedly, the question of labels reminds me that very often labor conditions in the third world that are favorable to industrial development cannot be compared with those in the Western world. Sometimes, the decision not to buy a product that is manufactured by children in India may have negative repercussions on the Indian industry as a whole. Hence, there should be a balance between what is absolutely intolerable and what we can (and indeed must) tolerate in order to help that particular country. This is the case, for example, of our relationship with China. Recently, in the European parliament, I voted in favor of assigning the Olympics to China, even though someone had asked to vote against it because of its violation of human rights in Tibet and in other contexts of which we are all aware. But it is also true that the growth of international relations could contribute to bringing about some changes there. In the end, I voted favorably in spite of my doubts, even though the final decision on this matter is not in the jurisdiction of the European community. True, sometimes we are compelled to choose a politics of friendship with respect to these countries. Thus we could imagine a scenario where the United States had the obligation to be more democratic in the globalization process, but this would paradoxically translate in the promotion of an anti-American politics. As long as we Europeans do not become stronger than the United States-- a situation that would somehow force them to negotiate with us as equals, we shall not obtain any substantive success. This brings us to the question of Anti-Americanism as the other side of Anti-Globalization, and so on.

RORTY: I have always thought that contempt for America on the part of

European intellectuals was largely a matter of envious resentment. But recently I have begun to think that there really is what the media call a “difference of values.” The European intellectual elite may be right about the American middle class. The majority of people in that group are in favor of capital punishment, against gun-control, and have little interest in the welfare of people of color. The sense of moral responsibility and human brotherhood seems lower in the US than in countries like Canada, Italy and New Zealand.

VATTIMO This is the central point because we are truly confronted by a development that is predicated on the competition between different value-systems. It is not merely a question of economic competition; in Europe, we are more or less aware of the fact that many institutions, such as the welfare state or public assistance, are better here than in the United States. On the other end, in the matter of globalization, European industries sometimes demand a regime that is more similar to the American one. True, globalization, for the European economy, represents a strong temptation to become more competitive and more liberal, even in terms of the free market. The problem is that globalization does not translate into social development.

TAYLOR: “This is very much what we feel in Canada because we have a more developed welfare state as compared to the United States. But I think also that something new is happening with the new Republican government in this regard. The United States has been a remarkable hegemonic power in some ways because in regard to its exercise of military power and economic influence. There is also the apparent disregard for world opinion. Consider the Kyoto protocol. What is important is that the forces of United States turn back to the other philosophy. You can get much further if you go slowly through consensus than if you go by confrontation and play on people’s arrogance.”

VATTIMO: Let’s pay attention to the difference between left and radical left with respect to the celebrations associated with NATO. I am more optimistic, probably because I do not know the situation from the inside. But in Europe, American culture or vision still has many supporters. Let us consider, for example, the extreme left in Italy and in Europe. It would be enough to read “Liberation” in France or “Il Manifesto” in Italy. All the cultural models come from the United States, which is in clear contradiction with an anti-American posture. So nowadays we still have a positive image of American culture. Until a few years ago, the anniversary of NATO was celebrated in a negative manner by the left, whereas now it is the opposite. We were aware of the many political disadvantages but for various reasons (both strategic and technical) America still represented a positive model. Rather than emphasizing the gap, we should be working with America to change the present administration. I have the impression that on this specific issue you don’t see a big difference between a Democratic administration and a Republican one: if Gore had won the election, what would have changed with respect to globalization?

RORTY: If Gore had won the election and if Democrats had won a majority in both chambers of Congress, the American government would not be nearly as isolationist as it is now. Clinton was an internationalist, but he was paralyzed by the Republican majority in Congress. As long as there is such a majority, it is not important who is in the White House. The Republican party has been hijacked by rednecks, gun nuts, and religious fundamentalists who little interest in the welfare of people in other countries.

VATTIMO: It is also a question of anti-modernity, because there are a lot of attitudes within the anti-globalization movement that demonize the American way of life and modernity. This aspect concerns a few ecologists like Jose Bove, the French peasant who is known for destroying a MacDonalds restaurant. What do you think about some of these aspects of anti-globalization?

RORTY: I don't really see much to connect American culture, in the sense of American popular music, Hollywood movies and MacDonalds, with the role of America on the global political scene. The fact that everybody in the world sings songs written in the United States seems unimportant to me. Intellectuals should spend less time talking about the "American style of life" and focus instead on America's economic and military power, and on how this power could be used for the well-being of humanity.

TAYLOR: I agree for the most part. However, I think that there is also a problem of preserving other cultures and languages, which justifies the politics of support and protection of originary languages—for example, in the field of cinema—while the tendency of American negotiations is to make language homogeneous. There will be consequences, I think, for supporting the preservation of other languages.

VATTIMO: At the international level, we probably need regulations against forms of exclusive control, for it is true that people generally prefer watching American movies. On the other hand, it is true that American productions are attractive in many ways. Hence, we have to resist their pull. Let us consider, then, cultural competition not only as a spiritual question, but also as a 'world' that introduces us into another world. In regard to past cultures, too, it is said that the Romans conquered the Greeks, while Greek conquered Latin. I am thinking of this example because the novelty of our epoch is that the speed of communication involves a sort of natural monopoly, which did not exist at the time of the Greek or of the Latin language. For example, the Greek language did not become the language of the first Roman Empire, and so a local language was allowed to develop. I don't know what would happen if everybody spoke English. This is my point. To be sure, we may well think that this is an exaggerated preoccupation with identity. Sometimes, however, I think that identity is like a family or a Church, which must be abandoned in order to become natural. I am not a supporter of identity. On the other hand, it is true that

the multiplicity of cultural identities somehow ensures survival; take, for example, Chinese medicine (acupuncture): it would not exist as such, if everybody practiced the official Western medicine. I don't know how to promote it. In Europe, I often see government initiatives that protect or promote local cultures, though it seems to be a more restricted, and not terribly interesting, phenomenon. For example, there are places in Italy where, thanks to government intervention, festivities that were no longer celebrated have been resumed. Should I support these kinds of interventions? This is my point. Probably, even my use of English demonstrates that when English will become a universal language, it will be forced to respect the local dialects. On the one hand, I see the globalization of culture as a liberating movement, as the possibility of going beyond the limits of regions; on the other hand, I don't want to lose my ability to speak the dialect of Piedmont. Once, when I met Umberto Eco in New York, we spent the entire evening telling jokes in the dialect of Piedmont, of Turin. The issue is quite ambiguous, because of the risk of falling in local identity movements (i.e. the Baskos, as violent defenders of local cultures). However, there is a risk of losing one's own roots, too. In fact, I am the member of the "Accademia della Latinità," an academy of Latinists that was founded by a man in Brazil, which includes members from Portugal, France, and perhaps Canada. The aim of the academy, explicitly stated in its constitution, is to defend new Latin cultures, languages, and histories. We have been discussing how to act accordingly, since it is not so simple to hold on to such a position without becoming too nationalist, too local, or too philo-American. France, too, has brought forth the idea of cultural exception in international debates, because subsidies for cultural products cannot be seen merely as damage to the competition. This is a thesis that I could support.

RORTY: I disagree with Taylor on this issue. A world in which English was the only language would not be so bad, in my view. If that should be the destiny of the world, I don't think it is a tragedy. There are clear advantages in a universal language. The advantages of a universal communicative ability might compensate for the loss of cultural diversity. It would be beautiful if we could have them both, but if we are compelled to choose, I would choose the first. The standard "Europe is to America what the Greeks were to the Romans" is inaccurate. The cultural exports from the United States to Europe have produced a lot of advantages for Europe, as when America imposed a constitutional democracy on the Germans, or as when the "Velvet Revolution" used rock-and-roll to achieve its aims.

VATTIMO: Yes, but it was the language and culture of a more democratic country. Is my idea feasible, of a supra-national language—possibly English— as compared to the relationship between national language and locally existing languages? I consider my dialect and identity from a universal point of view, so I do not claim that others are like me. And yet, I would like (for my dialect) to have a chance to survive. On the other hand, it may well be possible that globalization, once it will become real without the additional imposition of a

specific economy, will stimulate different kinds of cultural productions. Let's take, for example, the popular interest for Indian or Chinese culture. The scenario could be different. Europe is, ultimately, a very small continent (where, however, a lot of people speak English) and we are not able to hinder it. But if Brazil with its Portuguese language were less poor or if Spanish were not so marginal, America could become a Spanish-speaking country. Something can always change, and in this sense we could believe in a form of international politics that would be more cultural and more liberal.

TAYLOR: For example, Brazilian telenovelas have been dubbed in English, instead of being transmitted in their own original language.

VATTIMO: The English language has clearly many advantages, because it is one of the easiest to learn, though not so easy to speak as my own experience shows! I am thinking of Polish people who speak several languages more easily as compared with Italians, because they are more complex; or of the Chinese who will probably be converted to the use of the English language, once they discover it. There are a lot of issues involved here.

TAYLOR: Universal bilingualism will be a factual given, i.e. it will not be so dramatic if the English language will not become universal.

VATTIMO: I have a few more questions. In theory, globalization is supposed to equalize minimize poverty by its generation of wealth. Yet over the last two decades, the difference between rich and poor has increased. How do we explain it? The 1990s were a paradise for Western industries because of the increase in profits, and yet world poverty did not diminish, proportionately, in the same manner. According to some statistics, people who live with a dollar per day have decreased from 28 to 23 %, but the world's population has increased, and there are more poor now as compared to ten years ago. This is a challenge for us. Optimistically, I am also thinking in the optimistic terms of "let's trade freely and everything will be better." In the 1950s and 60s, there was an economic boom in Italy, which occurred also thanks to the internal migration from the south to the north. At the beginning, the living conditions of migrants in Northern Italy were all but favorable, but after a decade the situation changed. Probably, at the global level the question of migration is much more complex and the time required for settling is much longer as compared to what happens internally within a single nation. I believe that we are moving toward a situation where, paradoxically, socialism will be the only regime for the world's economy.

Let us consider another question. As a member of the European Parliament, I was in the commission that was charged with looking into the phenomenon of Echelon. Echelon is something that concerns you, rather than me, because America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain have organized a satellite based system of global electronic surveillance, so that Australia and New

Zealand can control anything. Such a system involves a strong form of public control. Without public control, strong democratic states are not politically organized by public power. This is the point for me. I was really convinced that the socialist economy had failed (i.e. in Russia and Cuba), but now I am no longer sure about it because of the contradictions of the capitalist system that have emerged at the level of the multinationals. The multinationals have become a sort of world government, which is not at all democratic. It is governed by share-holders, so that we should imagine a scenario with universal share-holders. Perhaps the problem behind the anti-globalization movement is precisely the model of society. The same holds for anti-Americanism. The American model of society seems tied with government, even though not this is not the case for the minority. The question confronting us is the following: our society is becoming a society of two thirds. Two thirds of the people are well off, while the remnant possess nothing. The problem lies in the model of society.

RORTY: The Bush administration thinks that the more economic interdependence and free trade increase, the sooner democracy will be take over everywhere. Even Habermas suggested something to this effect when he said that bureaucratic rationality sooner or later would lead to the triumph of women's rights in East Asia. This way of reasoning could be right. There is, however, another way of looking at the problem. It is quite possible that the CEOs of the multinationals seeking markets in Asia and in the in territory of the old Soviet Union, might start working together with the Russian Mafia and with the corrupt leadership of the Chinese military—the people who now control much of China's economy. Such people might come to prefer working without binding legal contracts, and without the rule of law—without the institutions that helped made possible the rise of democratic institutions. Western C.E.Os will have to decide whether they can make more money for themselves and for their share-holders by adopting Asian methods, rather than by bringing Western institutions to Asia. Asia might corrupt the West, instead of being democratized by the West. .

TAYLOR: This is a paradox that we have to accept. Part of the difficulties lie in the fact that ideological arguments are being pushed forward, while at the same time others argue that liberalizing the market will resolve all the problems.

RORTY: The greatest danger I see in the West at the present time is the growth of what Eisenhower called “the military-industrial complex,”—the triangle of power made up of the Pentagon, the defense contractors, and the leaders of Congress. This complex was responsible for crazy ideas such as Bush's Star Wars—i.e. the space-based missile defense shield. It is a kind of politics that bypasses public discussion and works exclusively in the interests of generals and C.E.Os. The growing corruption of governments in the West, and particularly in the US, could be fatal to democratic hopes.

VATTIMO: In Europe there is a strong dependence on the American system because the politics of defense lies in the hands of people who have been educated in American universities. This situation is similar to that of certain South American countries, where the military is educated and cultured. This is a danger. How can the democratic will of the people be heard if the media are in the hands of capitalists? This is a huge problem. Boycotting--like the local associations that go from door to door-- may help. In Italy, left-wing politics in the following years will not be able to express itself beyond certain limits, which are established and fixed by the media tycoon Berlusconi. It is the same as in other countries. There is an enormous quantity of money that moves in very specific directions. Berlusconi owns the main publishing house in Italy, three television channels, and he is the Prime-Minister.¹ He controls the largest advertising companies. In this capacity, he is able to kill off the publications of the left simply by withdrawing parts of the subscriptions. If we were really good politicians, we would realize that here democracy itself is at stake. The Berlusconi-problem, in Italy, --widely reported by the European press before the elections-- may well be the example of the first step toward democracy's transformation in Europe. The situation is all but simple, and this is why in Italy and elsewhere the left has attempted to enter into dialogue with the anti-globalization movement, because it seems to be the only popular force, albeit confused and variegated between fundamentalists and ecologists, that can still be seen nowadays.

TAYLOR: Whenever there is a need to awaken public opinion and make the news, a better politics of information is necessary. It is necessary, for us and for the left, to be organized at the international level. The same holds for Europe's control of the press, for the rest of Europe must react against Berlusconi.

VATTIMO: The problem is: what is the rest of Europe? Germany and France are relatively independent, and Spain's socialists will probably win the next elections. However, I don't believe much in the socialist parties, because when they were in power they too were corrupt.

In Italy, people sometimes listen to the radical left, which is a sort of '*testimonial*' left, whose limitation is that it has no intention of taking part in any government. Moreover, there is a reformist left, with which I am very passionately in disagreement because they are more or less responsible for the loss of the elections. Some bizarre statistics argue, though, that even with the support of the radical left (i.e. Bertinotti's Communist Refoundation), we would have lost the elections to Berlusconi. But I still have a few doubts about it.

¹ Note that Berlusconi is no longer the Italian Prime-minister since he lost the elections to the left-wing coalition in Spring 2006.

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