Surviving the Global Epoch: *The Myth of Sisyphus* Revisited

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> "There is something feeble, and a little contemptible, about aman who cannot face the perils of life without the help of comfortable myths. Almost inevitably some part of him is aware that they are myths and that he believes them only because they are comforting. But he dare not face this thought, and he therefore cannot carry his own reflections to any logical conclusion. Moreover, since he is aware, however dimly, that his opinions are not rational, he becomes furious when they are disputed."

> -Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, 219-220

Human beings are essentially subjective. On deeper introspection, it might become clear that we exude values and sensibilities more naturally and predominantly thanrationality and logic. But, we do vacillate based on time, circumstances and interests. To exemplify, Russell's aforementioned adage is a product of his broader belief in rationalism, progress and the scientific temper. He denigrates what many people may treat as sacrosanct in their lives –their own basic systems of belief. But, how do we know that the self-same rationalism it itself not a myth? Were not the maxim of logical positivism challenged and even discarded by Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper and the likes to usher in a different comportment of logic? Making a religion out of science, by guarding its ambits jealouslyonly reaffirms its frailties, its mutability and its symbolic nature to be akinto that of a myth. Didn't Russell clamour unfoundedly for a better world, devoid of nuclear weapons and wars, pestilence, savagery and hunger, elsewhere (*Has Man a Future?* 7-14)? Thus, rationalism and utopianism are often traits embodied by the same man, and we are never purely either a rationalist or an anti-foundationalist. In other words, we continuously create myths (stories/narratives) either secular or religious as explanations of the cosmos, having a generic fluidity which reflects the indeterminacies of human lives. Myths are symbolic tales. They may be connected to belief systems or rituals and can help in directing social action and values.And when we conceive of values in interpersonal and social settings, we are soon confronted with the inexorable dynamics of power and authority. This brings us directly to the question of politics. If politics is basically the struggle for power and is a necessary variable in all spheres of human life, will not the myth created by the powerful triumph over those of the vanquished? One such myth in our present milieu is globalization; fostering an even profound myth of the 'global man'. If Russell is to be believed, then man indeed believes in the more comfortable of myths. Nietzsche would interject that it is because those are more life affirming. The present endeavour tries to fathom how and why the myth of globalization has been robbing man of his very nature, his surroundings and even his sanity – alienating him not only from his immediate life, but his aspirations. And the ways in which the more comforting myth of affirmation and personal rebellion against the absurdity of his existence (which becomes evident first to others and only then to himself) elucidated in Albert

Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* be revamped to provide hope in a hopelessly reified and 'global' world. In short, the present paper resorts to an interpretation of a time-honoured myth for answering a very basic and at once private dilemma: how to live and find meaning in the global age.

The 'Globalism' Myth

In almost all publications emanating from the academia of this epoch there is a trenchant reminder that our socio-political, cultural and economic lives unfold in what Kenichi Ohmae has called a borderless world; where the workings of the market's invisible hand have powers and reach beyond anything that Adam Smith could have possibly imagined (*The End of the Nation State* 41). In recent years, global trade flows along with capital mobility and national competition for investment –creating a genuinely global labour market without taking into consideration the social and environmental costs of such interconnectedness-have animated the need for careful scrutiny into the context provided by the phenomenon of globalization. Like every myth, globalization is difficult to define, and there are myriad scholarly differences surrounding its nature and scope. Although the 'channels of interaction' fostering globalization are indeed economic, it also has significant economic and political implications. And akin to the concept of human security in the XXI century, the impacts of globalization can be deconstructed not only to the systemic and national, but also to the societal and human units of analysis. The diffusion of familiarity with key brand names, the speed of social interconnectivity through the use of ICTs have transformed lives, by converting localized issues into global political discourses, among diverse people who are no longer constrained by the ambits of their economic status and national identities (Schrecker 3). Perhaps the paramount socio-cultural accompaniment to the emergence of the myth of an interconnected economic order is the notion of 'globalism'. The view that one has to choose between primordial identities and forms of production or the global outlook; in other words, globalism views destructive social and economic processes as natural and inevitable –and any ethical and political opposition to this destructive urge, which may favour the sanctity of localized existence, as confused, unnecessary and retrograde.

But, such comfortable generalizations aside, what is so mythical about the myth of globalization? The developed world as the repository of economic and political power wishes to propagate the following myth:

> The world economy has internationalized in its basic dynamics, it is dominated by uncontrollable market forces, and it has as its principal economic actors and major agents of change truly transnational corporations that owe allegiance to no nation-state and locate wherever on the globe market advantage dictatesThis image is so powerful that it has mesmerized analysts and captured political imaginations. (Hirst and Thompson 98).

The same authors have proffered what is perhaps by far the most convincing analysis of globalization as a necessary 'comforting myth' propagated by the global powers that be. That globalization is not a sacrosanct reality, but is a powerful narrative wielded by the denizens of 'comparative advantage', at the cost of the quality of human lives can be nominally established by focusing on its contradictory economic realities. It is a form of truism that since the 1960s, economic interconnectedness has increased due to a myriad of domestic and international

factors. However, a closer look yields a plethora of unfounded claims held by radical hyper-globalists. Following Hirst and Thompson (98), three facts can be adduced herein to establish the mythical elements of world-wide interconnectedness: first, the absence of a commonly accepted model of the new global economy and how it differs from previous international structures; second, in the absence of such a model to facilitate verification of trends, the tendency to casually cite examples of the internationalization of sectors and processes, as evidences of growth driven by autonomous global market forces is presumptuous; and third, the lack of historical depth, or the tendency to portray current changes as unique and unprecedented with the propensity of being prolonged into the future, threatens more than it reassures. Thus, belying the sanguinity of hyper-globalizers, Hirst and Thompson weave a polemic which thoroughly reduces globalization to a myth. Arguing insteadthat the present rhetoric surrounding a highly internationalized economy is not unprecedented and has been raging with leaps in technological innovations since the 1870s; that genuinely transnational companies are rare and capital mobility does not axiomatically lead to massive shifts in investment and employment from the advanced to the developing countries; that the world economy is far from genuinely global, concentrated in specific belts; and finally that the wielders of economic power have the capacity to exert powerful governance pressures over financial markets and other economic tendencies –in short, global markets are at the beck and call of great powers and the economic discourse prevalent among their elites (Hirst and Thompson 98-99). Hence, any strong version of globalization –especially its economic facet- is a myth constructed by a particular clique with interests of its own: for without the myth of a truly globalized economy, the socio-cultural and political consequences of the unadulterated lust for the lucre would be threatening and ultimately unsustainable.

Globalization and Alienation: The Myth of the Global Man

As an indictment to the myth of globalization, one can legitimately pose the question: whether or not increases in spatial mobility and communication abilities foster greater connectedness among peoples and locales? The resolution of this dilemma would entail a discussion on alienation and its relation with globalization; it would also require negotiating the understanding deeper into a single unit of analysis, i.e. the individual in the global age. The foremost irony of the post-industrial and globalized eras, is that their significant myths rest on the bulwark of greater specialization which differentiates one man from another. Ironically, economic development makes people and places parts of a holistic setup accentuating alienation or estrangement. Larger control organizations reduce man to a mere cog in an ostensibly self-operating system, coordinating and synchronizing their actions –separating the individual from any comprehension of the system that embraces him like a caul. For Janelle, the spatial division of labour reinforces this pattern of alienation, giving rise to highly segmented views on the nature of society (Janelle 38). Each and every region of the world, under the impact of this powerful myth has degenerated into parochialism, projecting hostility to the 'other'. The same author believes that this broad synthesis of social evolution over time has increased individual specialization and has enlarged the span of control organizations, resulting in greater differentiation of the parts from the whole (Janelle38-39). As individuals in specific regional setups come to know that they are just indirect beneficiaries of an unforgiving global

economic system of greed and have no points of exit, the socio-political manifestations of alienation and stress reveal to him his real incapacity to wield any power over the system and his own place within it. The dominant narrative of globalism embodies increasing spatial mobility of individuals and organizationsand decreasing long-term fidelity to places of residence (Janelle 39). Hence, at the local level, an individual's sense of control and participation in governance suffers. Consequently, the ability to resolve conflicts –which bring the local and global at loggerheads- is also diminished.

The alienating effects of globalization is being felt not only in the developed world, but also in our own milieu. 'Separation' is the term to explain this crisis (Janelle 40). The hallmark of this is the ever-increasing distance between the workplace and the home. The advent of large urban setups and new transportation technologies often compound the feeling of separation. Consequently, individuals in the service of the global market have to devote more time to commuting which leaves them with little scope for family and community socializing. And as the proportion of independent members of extended families –having specialized roles in the production process- increases, the distance of their spatial dispersal increases as well. Such social separation serves as an indicator of alienation. Studies by Armand M. Nicholi Jr. confirm a positive correlation between the strength of family support and the emotional health of children and adolescents (227-241). The dispersal of families on broad regional and continental scales fosters a growing sense of rootlessness, reinforced by the pace of change and by the dependence on ICTs to overcome distance. Unrestrained economic growth is often anathemic to the past, with its inexorable zest of building newer infrastructures by obliterating older structures and neighbourhoods. Residential communities stand sharply divided by social cleavages and variances in income, ethnicity, race and demographic traits (Janelle 41). In the name of world-wide interconnectivity, the globalism myth leads to diminished intercommunity contact and understanding: the ones who reap only a perfunctory share or no share at all of the global market find themselves trapped in poverty and in urban ghettos; while the direct beneficiaries of the new rhetoric enjoyat a premium privately secured communities, lifestyles and amenities.

The global connectivity has indeed led to greater interrelatedness. But the cognition of collective and specific vulnerabilities has increased nonetheless. The fear of a nuclear holocaust, resource exhaustion, environmental hazards, the movement of massive refugee populations as a consequence of war and economic instabilities, and the specter of terrorism are but instances from which there seems no escape short of basic changes in human values and habits (Janelle 43). The present author asks, can we be sure of their amelioration in the wake of a particular community's changed circumstances and imaginings? Perhaps one cannot betray tangible realties with an affirmative retort. In the harsh realities fostered by the 'global' myth, no nation, no community,not even individuals are shielded from the caprices of economic pseudo-interconnectivity. As one author, elucidating forms of separation at the local and global levels has opined: political boundaries, Iron Curtains, and military alliances are ephemeral and offer no protection (Ohmae *The Borderless World*).

Although increasing levels of global interaction help in the awareness of world issues, significantly large populations remain outside the precincts of the global exchange of information –especially in developing economies. But, the general diffusion of information to

the broader population shows greater expansion. The alienating impact of this technologically driven information revolution can be located in the rapidity of modern transportation and communication linkages which might assail a community's cultural integrity and sense of geographical position. To exemplify, the exposure of primitive indigenous cultures to globalism through mass media must be practiced with caution and sensitivity, lest it is confronted with reaction and rejection. Even in developing economies –much like instances observed in the developed world during the last quarter of the XX century- a growing substratum of the populace may find such connectivity intimidating, alienating them from an economic system driven by the imperatives of global demand and supply and isolated from the daily hardships of unemployment and poverty (Janelle 44). The globalism myth favours interconnectivity among metropolitan centres at the cost of localism; it fosters concentration of political and economic power risking inequalities in the allocation of wealth; and externalizes socio-economic and environmental problems to those residing on the margins of the world economy without any recognition of its consequent estrangement. In short, these are the comportments of alienation emanating from the not-so-comfortable myth of globalization.

Such are the inevitabilities nurtured by globalism in the lives of communities and families. The point, however, is to further the analysis of the impact of such vagaries on the life of an individual. In other words, to fathom the contradictions within the 'global man'. What constitutes his myth? The study by Nicholi referred above (227-241) concludes that the youth of today exhibits a greater likelihood of dropping out of schools, having children out of wedlock, resorting to drug and other substance abuse –and ultimately committing suicide. Owing to the impact of alienation on adults the rates of divorce, street crime, alcohol abuse, drug addiction and so on as manifested behavioural deviances have shown a marked propensity of leading to suicide. Man has never been so sanguine of his growth and economic security in preceding epochs; conversely, he has never been so vulnerable to alienation before the advent of the global age. He has the power of the world residing within the gadgets he carries everywhere, he has the access to travel and enjoy the fruits of his economic activities regardless of national and geographical constraints. But, during an unassuming yet propitious day, when his sensitivity takes over, destroying his veil of ignorance, when he comes to see that the successes heaped onto him as a effective minor character in the great myth of change unfolding around him is only his own imagining and is meaningless, nay alien to the world around him, his charade of respectable behaviour soon falls off. There may come a day, when any person, involved in any activity of the reified system may ultimately conclude that for all his life he was in the wrong, that his work is not his own, and he is separated from everything which his subjectivity had once deemed necessary and sufficient for his existence.And the epitome of it all is the very pertinent feeling that there are insoluble paradoxes in between himself and his surroundings, more profoundly within his own being. The situation engendered by the myth of globalism – unfolding so obtrusively in our surroundings and within our own selves, thereby requiring no academic citation- can be summed up in the following way: confronted with the absurd, man is becoming a victim of alienation; conversely, recognizing the alien and impersonal character of his own existence, man soon recognizes the absurdity of his life. This is a vicious cycle, a sword that cuts both ways, a malady which becomes direr by the sensitive estimation that not only the family, community and nation, but the entire world is looking at a man, judging his every

move, commenting on his every frailty and bestowing upon him laurels for nothing but his productive capabilities –not to forget, with a tacit warning of beinghastily consigned to the dustbins of history once his skills falter or his economic judgmentrecedes. The 'global man', thus, is compelled to choose between a personality and an economic status, which leads him to an overwhelming question: is life worth living in the global age? His subjectivity permitting, an untimely meditation may dawn upon him: at the end of the day, being a cog in the wheel of the system, his efforts yield little more than futility. Even his successes are relative, ultimately signifying vanity. If a man knows the ultimate to a simple negation of the negation, where 'nothing' carries the value of the Kantian *nihil negativum* and assails the 'being', leading however to no such thing as a determinate 'becoming', his query with regard to the sanctity and value of his life in a milieu propelled by a narrative in favour of the economically powerful is perhaps the only legitimate question. Such a question also potentially impresses upon a broader philosophical enquiry, and particularly upon the realm of political philosophy.

The growing awareness of industrialization's alienating influences in the XX century finds expression in the writings of social critics, historians, litterateurs and philosophers such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, Jean Paul Sartre, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka and T. S. Eliot. The recurrent theme is that of a sick culture marked by the pathologies of defeat, estrangement and the failure of rejuvenation, in which humans are eking out a living, only to be divested of all meanings. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of great minds articulating the ways in which such a sickness has entrenched itself in the XXI century under the influence of globalism. Writing in the previous century, Robert Nisbet (1) opined that during the Renaissance it was the myth of 'reasonable man'which predominated; in the VIII century it was that of 'natural man' and in the XI century of'economic and political man'. And finally, under the influence of industrialization in the XX century there emerges the myth of the alienated or mal-adjusted man, forever in search of identity and meaning. Arguing in the same vein, Nisbet's logic can be prolonged into our own age to adduce the emergence of the 'global man': as a victim of the absurd, prone to more anxiety than what Kafka could have delineated in *The Trail*, or Sartre could have explained in *Nausea*, Auden in *The Age of Anxiety* or what Leonard Bernstein could have represented in a symphony inspired by Auden's verse, bearing the same title. The persistent theme which Nisbet seems to be investigating is that of "the individual uprooted, without status, struggling for relations of meaning, fellowship in some kind of moral community; of the disenchanted, lonely figure, searching for ethical significance in the smallest of things, struggling for identification with race or class or group" (11-12).

The epitomizing irony of the industrial age articulated in the 1950s (Nisbet *The Quest for Community*) can be transposed with ease to describe tangible realities engendered by the globalism myth: in the very age when man's control of environment is the greatest, his belief in himself has become weakest. And since this comportment of alienation is not societal, but personal, a man can very well ask in weariness and amazement as to why his is doing this at all. Since the cognition of the absurd is a personal tragedy, a resort to the comfortable myth of Marxism becomes unnecessary. To answer the question emanating from the uncomfortable myth of globalism, one can revamp and take recourse to the comfortable myth of affirmation and personal rebellion based on a philosophy which takes the absurd as its point of initiation.

The Myth of Sisyphus Revisited: Tackling the Globalism Myth

The timeless wisdom captured by Albert Camus in*The Myth of Sisyphus* can serve as a comfortable myth for souls confronted by the absurdity of the global age. This is not to argue that every person needs to take recourse to a philosophy which is more of an anti-philosophy – perhaps just those who are overwhelmed by their own sensitivity and the subjective estimation of their position in society. Man under the garb of rationality and objectivity does not require the cushion of myths and therein Russell's adage stands vindicated. But, perhaps it is only a matter of time… whatever be it, Camus' book-length essay can serve as the primer for living in the global age. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus presents a philosophy that contests philosophy itself, in tune with his own position which shifts from the extremes of nihilism and anti-nihilism. The essential paradox in his philosophy, which echoes in the life of the global man is the central notion of the absurd. Camus affirms that humans cannot escape asking the question, 'what is the meaning of life?' Being a professed non-believer in any philosophical system, Camus denies that there is an answer to this query and rejects every scientific, teleological, metaphysical or anthropomorphic end which seeks to provide a partial answer. Thus, while accepting that humans inexorably seek to understand life's purpose, Camus, like Nietzsche, is skeptical of the natural world, the universe and human enterprise providing an answer. The wisdom that a reading of Camus might impart to the global man is that existence itself has no meaning and we must learn to accept an irreparable emptiness. The absurd is thus, not only what the global man confronts one fine day, as a reflection of his futility, but is an element of his own self. As Camus wrote elsewhere, the absurd being the only truth, the essence of the human condition, one can only accept the "desperate encounter between human enquiry and the silence of the universe" (*The Rebel* 6). His philosophy of the absurd explores the consequences arising from this basic paradox, one that is seemingly dear to the global man, as a victim of estrangement.

Camus'explanation of absurdity is captured not as a philosophical argument. It is embodied in the interpretation of a myth: that of Sisyphus, condemned, straining to push his rock up the mountain, only to watch it roll down, and then descending after the rock only to begin anew, in an eternal cycle. Like Sisyphus, the global man cannot help but continue to seek after the meaning of life, only to see his (logical?) formulations tumble back down. Thus, happiness and salvation have dubious locations in the life of the global man forever enchained by his rational choices to a cycle of life Camus astutely encapsulates as "rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm" (*The Myth of Sisyphus 19*).

Armed with the knowledge of the human condition under the preponderant myth of globalism elucidated in the previous sections, suicide may seem to be a natural response to its underlying premise, viz. that life is absurd in the global age in a variety of ways. Camus' originality, resonating in this age of global helplessness is adduced right at the beginning of his investigation, He writes,

> "There is but one serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest… come afterwards. (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 11)"

Both in the presence and absence of life, man, divested of all meanings in a reified global system, is faced with a single condition expressed in a Camusean way as: it is absurd to find meaning in life when there are none, and to hope for some form of untrammeled existence after death given that the latter divests us of our bodily existence. The alienated man confronts the absurd under the burden of introspection. However, to whom shall he shift the burden of blame: to his corporate superiors if he is in the service of a multinational firm, to his departmental colleagues and fellow academics if he serves the commodified system of creating and disseminating knowledge or to his immediate family and peer group for compelling him to sign a pact with the devil assuring him of the baser pleasures of life? Camus thinks that it is absurd to try to know. Or to try to understand and explain the world with elegant yet ephemeral syllogisms, for he rightly sees –and that can be transposed to explain the futility of the global man- the vanity of any attempt to gain rational knowledge. In this, Camus is antagonistic to both science and philosophy, challenging the deterministic claims of both (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 17-32). The cardinal starting point of this theme lies in what Camus calls the 'absurd sensibility' (10), which is an intellectual malady of the age. Following his series of 'truisms' and 'obvious themes', Camus comes at a crucial juncture where he asks: does the absurd dictate death? (16). Elsewhere he writes that the absurd is an experience that must be affirmed; it is a point of departure in existence akin to Descartes' methodical doubt (*The Rebel* 4). *The Myth of Sisyphus* seeks to describe that elusive feeling of absurdity in our lives, which is accentuated under the impact of globalism, at once transforming the text into an explanation of our times and as a panacea to our daily existential crises.

Following his 'absurd reasoning', Camus arrives at the question of death, formulating what he believes to be an objective truth: that we must despair over reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 24). And this is perhaps the only comfortable myth the global man can embrace to further his earthly tenure; as this world in itself is not reasonable and that is all that can be said (27-32). The global man's effort to find meanings are driven by a nostalgia for unity, permissible not in his midst but in the bygone eras. Camus' comfortable myth resonates in the global age, as he points to the imperative and inescapable hiatus between "what we fancy we know and what we really know" (24), forever shall the global man remain a stranger to himself and the sooner he realizes this the better for him. There is no certainty, no God to help him overcome this sickness unto death, this most vapid alienation. Under such circumstances there are two alternatives: suicide and hope. Camus treats hope as a variable emanating from religion's assurance of a better life after death. Like Camus, the global man must discard both hope and suicide if he wishes to live. To live is to do without escape and with integrity to oneself, in rebellion and defiance of the vagaries of one's milieu and fate, balancing the tension which is so intrinsic to human life. For Camus, death is the profoundest of absurdities and one must die unreconciled and not of one's own free will (64-85). Life must be lived to the point of tears, if the global man wishes to cut athwart the vile myth surrounding his existence, if he is to regain the consciousness of his own morality and its ambits and to embark upon a personal rebellion against whatever in the system is life-denying.

By way of a Conclusion

How then must the global man remain committed to his life, consistent with absurd reasoning without being a victim to the spirit of nostalgia? Revamping *The Myth of Sisyphus* evokes only one answer: by abandoning the tracts of philosophy altogether, to find refuge in art and to create another comfortable myth. The final myth to counteract the ill-effects of globalism is where a man imagines himself as an artist. And once he recognizes that his life is ultimately his own and the product of his choices, the artist becomes the author of his existence. In the story of Sisyphus as incarnating a sense of life's ultimate futilities, Camus sees his ordeals and its consciousness as a triumph. Sisyphus demonstrates that we can live with the certainty of crushing fate, without the resignation that accompanies it (59-63). Having a direct bearing upon the conclusions of this paper is Camus' belief that Sisyphus reminds us of our futility to understand reality, and to strive instead toward living as the ultimate answer to the absurd. Akin to Sisyphus, man in every age, especially in the global epoch is his own fate; he is the embodiment of his frustration and can never escape it. Sisyphus relentlessly pushing his rock only to see it tumble down "is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock" (109). Will it be too much to ask of the same conduct from the global man, the modern Sisyphus? "Sisyphus, the proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition" (109). For the global man to come out of myth that enchains him, he must imagine himself as Sisyphus and axiomatically as Sisyphus happy, for "happiness and absurdity are the two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable" (110). It is not necessary that the discovery of the absurd in the global age will lead to happiness, but the acknowledgement of human frailties, limitations and the zest for wishing beyond our capabilities can help a man to posit any value and meaning on his life. And that might lead to happiness even in the midst of alienation and helplessness. In all its finality, in the inexorable penchant for creating dangerously, the modern Sisyphus, condemned by the economic powers that be, can find happiness in affirmation: that his fate belongs to him. Echoing the Nietzschean *Amor Fati*, Camus exhorts man to love his fate. After all, our burdens are our very own, globalism and localism notwithstanding.

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