May-2013

Book Review: It Isn’t that Simple: Globalization, History and Inevitability

Brian Payne

Bridgewater State University, brian.payne@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
What was thought to be [one] way turns out to be exactly the opposite; the pardon was a manifestation of the best in our politics, not the worst…

What was a statement of purpose. What she said to me was “Use all of our resources, use all of the resources to get to the bottom of this. Why? Because this is what we do. This is why we have protection under the First Amendment. This is our tradition. We don’t give up and I will not be told ‘Never.’” … I was 29 years old at the time, and to have the boss say in the face of economic and reputational peril “Let’s keep going” I like to interview him about the pardon, figuring that he would slam down the phone. But he said, “Fine.” So I … interviewed him at length, many times. I followed my method: got all the legal memos, interviewed you can guarantee the president gets a pardon, he’s going to resign and you’ll be president.” The deal was offered, but I rejected it. I did not pardon Nixon for Nixon, or for me—I knew I was going to become president. Nixon was finished, he was going to be impeached in the House and thrown out of office; it was inevitable. I pardoned Nixon for the country.” At the moment in ’74, there were hard economic times, we were in the middle of the Cold War, it was a time of great difficulty. Ford concluded, “I had to get Watergate off the front page. If he was investigated, indicted and tried, we would have two or three more years of Nixon and Watergate. We could not stand it. I had to pardon Nixon.” I can’t tell you how sobering it is to be twenty-five years later, I called up Gerald Ford. I had never met him, had never interviewed him, and said that I’d like to interview him about the pardon, figuring that he would slam down the phone. But he said, “Fine.” So I … interviewed him at length, many times. I followed my method: got all the legal memos, interviewed the other point I want to make is exactly equal. If you don’t do the work, you get it wrong, you miss the story, you don’t comprehend what it means. Thirty days after Nixon resigned and Gerald Ford was President, Ford went on television early one Sunday morning and announced that he was giving Nixon a full, total pardon for Watergate. He went on television early on a Sunday morning hoping no one would notice. But it was widely noticed. There was the larger question of justice—why does the person at the top, the President, get a pardon and 40 people go to jail, hundreds of people have their lives wrecked in one way or another? I thought, at the time and for years after, there’s something unexplained about the pardon. Two years after the pardon was announced and granted, in the ’76 election, Ford ran against Carter and Carter won, in large part, because he had nothing to do with Washington, and because Ford still hadn’t answered that question of what happened with the pardon …
This journalistic and whiggish approach takes what are scores of individual and complex case studies, irons out the uniqueness of each place and time, and stitches them together into a fabric that Mann proclaims is global capitalism.

publications on the history of globalization, but this readability comes as a simplified version of complex issues. Mann’s discussion of the nineteenth-century guano industry is as good an example as any among his scores of case studies. Mann provides the reader with an understanding of the science of guano as a fertilizer, the history of agricultural reform in the nineteenth-century Europe, the brutality of the labor of guano extraction, the journalistic appeal to expose guano slavery, and the appeal to expose the brutality of the labor of guano extraction. Mann concludes that the economic happiness of the terrace farms has been forced to live covert, hidden around the world, whereas the pain is intense and local.” (505) Given that the effect of globalization is most profound on the local level, perhaps more local centered case studies would be more enlightening than grand narratives that tend to universalize the unique realities of people and environments all around the world. This journalistic and whiggish approach takes what are scores of individual and complex case studies, irons out the uniqueness of each place and time, and stitches them together into a fabric that Mann proclaims is global capitalism. To suggest that global capitalism is the product of Columbus’s “discovery” of the New World sheds the important context of 500 years of economic history and ignores the often painful development of that economic system. Just because we have global capitalism today certainly does not mean it was an inevitable result of the sixteenth–century Spanish silver trade. So what is Mann’s final assessment of this world that Columbus created? Following a passage that examines the life of a contemporary Amazonian farmer named Dona Rosario, Mann writes: “They [Amazonians] had been forced to live covert, hidden lives, always worried about dispossession. Now they would be free to live in their creation, the world’s richest garden.” (488) The success of Rosario’s farm, according to Mann, was due to her acceptance of non-native, market-oriented crops and the use of new technologies such as freezers and cell phones that enabled more successful engagement with the global food market. Thanks to globalization, Rosario found economic happiness. Yet just a few pages later, Mann takes us to the Filipino terrace farms at Ifugao, which have been identified as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Mann tells of the economic collapse of the terrace farms and efforts to introduce heirloom rice production for export to Europe and the United States. Mann concludes that “The global market is not the solution, activists say, but the problem! These supposed do-gooders are just hooking Ifugao into the worldwide network of exchange, making them dependent as never before on the whims of faraway yuppies!” (506) Thus, in this story, global capitalism killed indigenous culture and environment. This inconsistency might actually be the book’s real contribution. Globalization is especially complex. Neither the eco-activist nor the corporate capitalist is exclusively right. From an economic worldview, globalization is a smashing success. There is more food and more money than ever. But from a local environmental and cultural perspective it is a crushing defeat. Local culture has been evaporated by globally mass-produced goods ranging from Nike shoes and shorts to Starbucks coffee and McDonald’s hamburgers. Mann’s final assessment comes at the very end of the book: “Economists have developed theoretical tools for evaluating these inconmensurate costs and benefits [of globalization]. But the magnitude of the costs and benefits is less important than their distribution. The gains are diffused and spread around the world, whereas the pain is intense and local.” (505) Given that the effect of globalization is most profound on the local level, perhaps more local centered case studies would be more enlightening than grand narratives that tend to universalize the unique realities of people and environments all around the world. Individual writing styles and modes of authorship aside, Powers has earned the right to be placed in this distinguished category through his ability to communicate the innumerable horrors of war and the indelible scars it leaves behind. This book cuts like a knife and should be required reading for Americans who readily embrace military solutions to national security challenges. Powers’ greatest achievement in this work may be his compelling ability to evoke the psychological wreckage the Iraq War has left behind among America’s combat veterans. The book details Private James Bartle’s struggles to readjust to civil society after his tour in Iraq and his efforts to organize his wartime memories into a coherent and meaningful past, all while coming to grips with the fate of his good friend, a fallen soldier. From the moment he steps back onto American soil, Bartle seethes at a nation he no longer identifies with: “the land of the free, of reality television, outlet malls and deep vein thrombosis” (101), very different concerns than those that occupied soldiers in Iraq. Powers’ protagonist experiences a tremendous sense of dislocation and alienation, withdrawing completely from family, friends, and society as he struggles to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an inescapable souvenir of war. The author’s gripping elucidation of the challenges combat veterans face as they reintegrate into society is powerful stuff. The adulation he endures from civilians produces a more profound sense of isolation, like a “hole is being dug because everybody is so fucking happy to see you, the murderer, the fucking asshole, the at-bare-minimum bearer of some fucking responsibility, and everyone wants to slap you on the back and you start to want to burn the whole goddamn country down, you want to burn every goddamn yellow ribbon in sight.” (145) The question of guilt pervades this book. Bartle’s guilt is intensely personal and involves a fellow soldier, but readers will detect a larger conversation at play in Powers’ story. When something goes terribly wrong, as the Iraq War did, someone ought to be held to account. Powers offers some oblique answers, but his characters are too wrapped up in their own circumstances to worry much about making any bold assertions. These are left for the reader to contemplate. But Powers does offer some biting commentary. For example, the U.S. government’s decision to go to war intrudes on Bartle’s anti-heroic army life, one he had adopted to escape home, prove his manhood, and avoid responsibility. As his unit prepares to deploy to Iraq, Bartle finds himself “struggling to find a sense of urgency that seemed proportional to the events unfolding in my life.” (34-35) Washington faced similar challenges as he confronted an emerging insurgency after toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime. In the novel, “Mother Army”...