

The Anson Report ®

Globalization, Ancient and Modern —

Laurence Bergreen's recent history of Marco Polo's 4,000 mile, 13th century journey to Central Asia and China * serves as an apt and compelling reminder that though relatively new in concept and practice, globalization is in reality a more ancient and hard-won phenomenon.

The Venice of Marco Polo's day was a primary commercial city linked by water to both land and sea routes and to other urban centers. It was also an expanding urban arena from which merchants had already launched a series of ventures to the East for silk, spices, and jewels, which at the time served as coinage. However, wealth from commerce remained largely in the hands of 150 governing merchant families. Upward mobility into this closed circle was rare and membership a prized commodity to Marco Polo and his father and brother whose own travels along what in the nineteenth century was termed the Silk Road occurred during the years the younger traveler was born and grew up in the burgeoning city-state. Though family members and other merchants had preceded him, Marco Polo's recorded ventures, the *Travels*, stand out in the historical record for their length, 25 years, and for their depth, having been written by a merchant whose experience coping with extreme mountainous and desert terrains, as well as with polygamous and polytheistic peoples unknown in the West, ultimately crafted a person of the merchant's occupation with an addition of skills similar to that of a contemporary participant-observer and ethnographer.

There is little doubt that Marco Polo marveled at the way the Mongol Empire achieved conquest, subjugation, and in some instances, viable exchange relationships, with other peoples, through the use of its massive, 100,000 member army, which was divided into flexible segments that could unite or fragment according to military demands or type of terrain. He was captivated by the dense population and colorful court of the Kublai Khan at Xanadu, near present-day Beijing, and in particular, by the way large governmental and administrative buildings made of wood were capable of being assembled during the summer's hot season, and then disassembled and moved as the Mongol's pastoral nomads sought out the cooler temperatures and diverse environments of winter. It was his own service as a tax collector that took him to areas far outside the capital, and permitted the recording of and commentary on the customary lifeways of a culture heretofore relatively unfamiliar to the West.

In truth, the great court, as well as the masterly social art of mobility through assembling and disassembling homes and dense populations for the purpose of maintaining a herding economy, was on the cusp of decline as Marco Polo returned to his native Venice. Brutal conquest resulted in the inclusion of even eastern European societies. And presented with a constant need to maintain complex and expansionary ties, the Mongol's own expansion was becoming difficult to manage from what, though mobile, remained a centralized administrative and political court. The process of fragmentation and its impact on formerly subject peoples is incompletely recorded. Today, however, the pastoral nomadic descendants that stood at the heart of society during Marco Polo's visit are concentrated in scattered groups throughout rural Mongolia in the main, and in neighboring modern nations, including, southern Russia, southern Afghanistan, Kazakstan, and Turkmenistan. The oil-rich nature of the contemporary Central Asian region, and its strategic location, have brought a different type of visitor during the postSoviet era. The energies associated with international banking institutions and the EU's Tacis project, both of which have developed financial aid programs that have as a broad goal the absorption of Mongolia and its rural populations into a sustainable global connectivity. From the early 1990's to 2006 the EU donated Euro 70 million of Mongolian economic development, and now anticipates the further transference of Euro 3-5 million annually from 2007-2013.

A major distinction between more ancient and modern globalization processes lies in the character of social arrangements involved in service delivery. The thirteenth century outreach involved small, tightly-knit merchant groups often beset by transportation difficulties. They were dependent on local populations as guides, and for their security as well. Moreover, even their desire to develop contacts and exchange relations with eastern merchants was an essentially episodic or unanticipated activity, one that carried no

real efforts on the part of large, organized groups that could be recapitulated in the course of future travels. For this reason, the impact of merchants on local cultures was limited to a relative few of the same occupation. Absent were international blueprints for national or regional financial aid. While these are today welcomed in Central Asian capitals, many analysts question whether holistic development plans will be appropriately configured, so that service delivery does not upset local lifeways, and therefore deprive rural populations involved in transitional economies an opportunity to evolve their own strategies amidst change.**

In this respect, researchers have noted that density of population among rural Mongolian nomads is no longer in existence though agricultural livelihoods combined with herding and seasonal migrations from summer to winter pastures remain the norm. Pasturelands continue to be held in common, but the polygamous composition of groups ancient travelers recorded have been replaced by smaller family households connected to 10 to 12 others by means of direct extended kinship and marital ties. Each household nevertheless retains its own agricultural plot and farming practices. Despite demographic decline, rural agrarian populations and herders in Mongolia continue to occupy a critical place in the economy, contributing at least 20% to the national GDP.

EU and other fact-finding missions have already begun to detect shifts in the traditional patterns of rural social organization that may complicate the future distribution of aid. Some aid, for example, may have been absorbed by the largest, wealthiest of extended household circles, thus heightening a once modest social hierarchy and transforming social arrangements that were relatively egalitarian by nature and tradition. The outcome of future service delivery to whole rural, herding groups might also be conditioned by the fact that wealth disparities have fostered the out-migration of younger members of local populations, who have now joined an already intense flow of people from Mongolia's hinterlands to its urban and industrial cities. Additional research on the unintended consequences of economic development may combine with completed findings that clearly suggest that out-migration results in household labor shortages. These have not actually made traditional pastoral economies less mobile, but have rendered them increasingly fragile nonetheless. A crucial, potential deficit arising from modern labor shortages is the question of succession: who will inherit livestock and farm, and therefore provide a permanent household and community model with which development programs, once begun, can continue to work? Assuming that sustainable economic development will rest on an equally sustainable social platform, both researchers and EU

development programs appear to have jointly concluded that rather than large-scale blueprints directed at national-level aid and economic reform, microprojects involving individuals and families in agrarian, vocational, and educational efforts, should be a hallmark of an international service delivery that seeks to move an outpost of a once thriving civilization from the fringe to the periphery, and hopefully, to help restore its status as a vibrant crossroads community once again.

Authors and analysts familiar with the descendants of those whose cultural achievements early travelers recorded and marveled at in a personalized fashion also appear to agree that sustainable contemporary aid will have to rest on a workable blend of close, empirical and objective research, and public policy development. Today's nomadic pastoralists of Mongolia represent one of their nation's and region's most impoverished groups, with most reportedly living on \$1 a day. The modern era has just begun to introduce the benefits and challenges of contemporary globalization. Ironically, and for the moment at least, it remains a globalizing era in which this ancient population now suffers from what the EU terms the burdens and the "tyranny of distance."

*Marco Polo: From Venice To Xanadu. New York, Alfred A. Knopf.

** Fratkin, Eliot and Robin Mearne. "Sustainability and Pastoral Livelihoods: Lessons From East African Maasai and Mongolia". Human Organization, (summer, 2003),Pp.1-14.