

**Critique of *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy
Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* by Amy Chua**

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In the book entitled *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*, Yale law professor Amy Chua argued that exporting Western values through the process of globalization brings more harm than good to the world. On one hand, economic benefits are only enjoyed by a small number of market-dominant minorities, such as the Chinese people in Southeast Asia, the Jews in Post-Communist Russia, the Ibo in West Africa, the Indians in East Africa, the Whites in Latin America, or the Tutsi people in Rwanda. But on the other hand, so-called “democratic” systems, introduced by America, empower majorities that are frustrated by the situation that they obtain only a small share of the economic fruits. In many cases this class distinction is demarcated by race. As a result, globalization breeds ethnic hatred and social instability. For example, in the last few decades the Chinese people have been the victims of numerous riots in Indonesia because the Chinese have been blamed for all social problems. After Putin became the Russian President, Jewish tycoons were accused of stealing national wealth and thus were under investigation by the government. Very often radical leaders who lead mass movements against the minorities have come to power through Western-style elections. Indeed, if open elections were held in the Middle East, it is possible that radicals like Bin Laden would attract most of the votes. In brief, free market and democracy, though working well in the West, should not be treated as universal and instant remedies to all societies.

Chua emphasized that she is not anti-globalization and that globalization does not cause

ethnic conflicts. Nonetheless, she found that globalization intensifies the problems mentioned in her book. Moreover, she did not attempt to reduce all global problems to the economic dimension; rather, she realized that religious beliefs and cultural values are sometimes the source of ethnic conflicts, as in the Bosnia and Kosovo crises in the 1990s. To be more specific, in a critic of Chua's book, Tupy (2003) pointed out that numerous incidents of ethnic conflicts happened before globalization or/and caused by non-economic factors. At the time of the Jewish expulsion in 1492, Spain was a mercantile monarchy. At the time of the anti-Jewish programs in 1881 and 1905, Russia was a pre-capitalist society. At the time of the anti-Chinese riot in 1969, Malaysia was less free than today.

Although Chua cited numerous examples to substantiate her claim that ethnic majorities' political empowerment through democracy and ethnic minorities' economic advancement through the free market are the dark side of globalization, throughout her book two important questions are never answered. First, why do some particular ethnic groups outperform others in the economic arena, and what can we do about it? Second, what is the essence of democracy? If democracy is abused in the form of a "tyranny of the majority," what can we do about it besides leaving the existing systems intact?

My responses to these two questions may be shocking to some readers: No matter how provocative racial issues are, we have to address the core of the problem. In the controversial book *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994), Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray tried to explain why Jewish, East Asian, and White people have higher IQ scores than Blacks and Hispanics. Not surprisingly, they were accused of being racists, for readers interpreted that they viewed the differences as genetically-based and thus deterministic. In 1996 when I attended the Annual Conference of the American Education Research Association, Professor Linda Gottfredson defended Herrnstein and Murray's research by saying, "The

performance gap by different groups is really out there. If we don't address this question now, our next generations will pay a higher price to face a bigger problem." * Gottfredson had conducted similar research to *Bell Curve* but was discouraged by her peers because the issue was too sensitive.

It is wrong to adopt a hasty inference to explain the performance gap between races without careful research and empirical substantiation. However, it is also problematic to evade the question and to rule out all politically incorrect hypotheses **without any research**. What happened in America is also happening in a global scale. Instead of seriously examining why Jews outperform Russians or Chinese merchants dominate the Southeast Asian economies in spite of persistent oppression by the majorities, such as setting quotas on the Jews and Chinese in university admission, authors like Amy Chua have shifted the focus to American arrogance and unilateral globalization. As Chua mentioned, globalization inflames, but does not create, ethnic hatred. If so, does it make more sense to counteract the **root cause** of the racial problem? Would it be more helpful to study the factors contributing to the success of those minority groups, and then encourage those who are behind to learn from their rivals? When the Japanese threatened US industry in the 1980s, and the anti-Japanese sentiment was at an all-time high in America, would it have been helpful to write a book conveying the message that free trade breeds cross-Pacific hatred and this continuing trend could lead to riots that burn down Japanese-owned factories? Fortunately, the Americans took another route, which was a massive study of the Japanese culture in general and the Japanese technology and management in specific.

My second response to the question of why some ethnic groups outperform others is: Why does race matter? China is a big winner in the globalization game. In the post-Mao era China has had double-digit or near double-digit economic growth for more than a decade; however, the income gap among classes has become wider and wider. To be specific, only residents in big cities,

such as Beijing and Shanghai, are earning more and more money each year. In contrast, farmers in the Northwest still live in a typical third world environment, in which basic needs are hardly fulfilled. Interestingly enough, while there are anti-Indian movements in Kenya, anti-Semitism in Russia, etc., there are no riots against the people of Shanghai or Beijing in China. The same pattern can be found in many countries. From the 1960s to 1980s Professor Domhoff (1983) debunked the myth that America is an equalitarian society, arguing instead that America is ruled by certain elites. Even without substantiation from social science research, the concentration of wealth and power into a few people's hands is very obvious in America. While racial riots do happen in America, resentment toward successful whites, like Michael Dell of Dell Computers or John Chambers of Cisco Systems, by other Whites is unheard of. Rather, Dell and Chambers are widely admired and people actively seek opportunities to work for Dell or Cisco. It seems that people are more tolerant of income inequality when the wealthy people are of the same race than when the richest people are aliens. Thus, perhaps it is more a psychological than an economic problem. As Martha Nussbaum (1996) suggests, xenophobia results from the perversion of ethnic pride. The remedy should not be less globalization, as Amy Chua suggested; instead, we need more cultural globalization to break racial barriers by promoting the concept of world citizenship and de-emphasizing emotional attachment to racial identity.

The second unanswered question in Chua's book is concerned with the essence of democracy. It is true that many radical leaders, including Hitler, came to power through some form of election or by popular support, and also that democracy can be abused in the form of a "tyranny of the majority." However, a healthy and functioning democracy should not allow abuse of power by a radical leader or a tyranny of the majority. It is commonly known that a true democracy should maintain checks and balances among different government bodies. It is a well-known fact that in the United States the Congress has the power to impeach the President, presumably the most

powerful person in the political system. The Clinton case is an obvious example. Further, the American system has both the Senate and Congress, in which different representation systems are adopted. The former is representation based upon the state regardless of population whereas the latter is representation according to population. Under this configuration even a small state with a small population would not be overpowered by a larger state, and consequently a tyranny of the majority can be avoided.

It is undeniable that some nations might use a superficial form of democracy to cover up their oppression. As a matter of fact, even Communist states claim their practices as “democratic” by applying the labels like “People’s democratic autocracy” and “Democratic centralized system.” If it is unfair to blame democracy for misuse of the democratic system in Communist nations, why is it justified to blame democracy for the radicalism and tyranny of majorities resulting from its misuse by other countries?

Actually, the problem of misguided democracy had already happened more than two centuries ago. The American Revolution and French Revolution broke out almost at the same time, but while the former led to a functioning democracy, the latter resulted in a “tyranny of the majority.” Later Napoleon took over France and crowned himself Emperor in such a way that the French people started to believe that democracy would not work at all and stability could only be maintained by a strong leader such as Napoleon. Nevertheless, eventually France became a true democracy after going through five Republics. Amy Chua warned us that it took the West a few hundred years of struggle to refine the system; an instant injection of Western-style democracy is too premature and thus dangerous to many nations. While the painful lesson of the French Revolution seems to concur with Chua’s assertion, the sharp contrast between the consequences of the American Revolution and the French Revolution reminds us that during the same period a functioning democracy did arise in the North American continent. In the previous section I

suggested studying why some ethnic groups tend to be more productive than others instead of evading the problem by slowing down free market and open competition. By the same token, when some democracies succeed and others fail, the rational response is to examine what makes some functional and others dysfunctional.

To be fair to Amy Chua, her book did not call for a cessation of the promotion of democracy; rather she suggested slowing down the pace when the condition of certain countries is not favorable to democratic reform. However, it is likely that this message would be taken by authoritative regimes to reject modern democracy altogether, rather than adopting a gradual approach to developing democracy. Interestingly enough, today many Chinese people subscribe to the notion that democracy may do more harm than good to China, and stability is more important than “one person, one vote.” This belief is manifested in the slogan “stability overwhelms everything else.”

Actually, the so-called “stability” maintained by strong leadership is only a **short term** solution. Take Yugoslavia as an example. During the rule of Tito, all ethnic groups and religious groups seemed to peacefully coexist side by side. However, after the death of the strong ruler, Orthodox Serbians, Islamic Albanians, and Catholic Croatians killed each other in attempts at ethnic cleansing. The same problem can be found in Post-Communist Russia. There was no Chechnya uprising during the Stalin era, but today Chechnya terrorism has become headline news in the Russian media almost every day. “Stability” in a non-democratic society would never make racial tensions go away; rather, it just suppresses and postpones the problems. To paraphrase Gottfredson, eventually our next generation would pay a higher price to countermeasure a bigger problem.

Conversely, although America is a multi-racial society and racial tensions do exist here, nothing like the Balkan crisis ever happens in America for there are democratic channels for

people to resolve racial conflicts or at least to express their discontent. In other words, democracy is a long term solution to racial tensions and other social problems, while stability is a very short-sighted approach. No serious political scientist or philosopher would promise that democracy could solve all social and racial problems overnight. As mentioned before, France had to experiment with five republics before it established a true democracy. In brief, the long term remedy to global instability is more and bolder globalization rather than slowing down its pace or maintaining the status quo.

Notes

* This comment was made in her speech during the conference, but was not in her conference paper.

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