

American University in Bulgaria

University Council Essay Competition 2018

“What does economic protectionism mean for the political and cultural exchange between nations?”

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR ELEPHANT

or

The Poacher's Guide Away from the International Market

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HOW TO TRAIN YOUR ELEPHANT

OR

The Poacher's Guide Away from the International Market

I am typing this while sitting in the sink of Skapto 2 kitchen. I just read an article about the rescue operation of a drowning elephant five miles off the coast of Sri Lanka. I wonder how it feels to be that elephant and the sink is the only place I could find that is suitable enough to simulate the experience. In fact, the animal was running away from poachers hunting for ivory. Since 1989, ivory trade has been banned in most parts of the world, but thousands of elephants, even babies, are killed throughout Africa and Asia to produce 'blood ivory'. The elephant tusks are later sold at black markets, with the revenues (often as the only source of income) feeding entire families of poachers. The name of the rescued elephant is Soroo and he is now officially employed in the tourism industry in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. I wonder if the same destiny is waiting for me when I get out of this sink.

This is a material world, and culture often comes from economics. The trade policies of states project their cultural values. In destroying 350 African elephant tusks of blood ivory (so that they cannot be sold on the black markets)¹, the Sri Lankan government established itself as a regional trailblazer in the fight against illegally obtained ivory. Such a policy reflects both a concern for the environment and animal rights and a confidence in the ability of the legal local non-ivory producers to compete with and win over smugglers in driving the economy forward. In 2017, China followed the Sri Lankan example and closed down its domestic ivory market.² Other places, and the European Union is one of them, have implemented strict control on domestic trade, with an exception for ivory antiques, therefore remaining slightly more lenient towards poachers. All of this followed from the 2016 trilateral agreement between China, the United States, and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which urged all countries, whose jurisdiction allows for ivory markets, to close down their national markets for commercial trade in raw and processed ivory in a global move to restrict poachery.³ This kind of trade barriers does create a façade of legal and environmental righteousness, but leaves a lot of space for poachers' creativity by introducing exceptions to the rule.

Politically, restricting trade in ivory with African and Asian countries, and between those, does not pose a threat to favorable political relations, especially when backed by the universal anti-poachery solidarity in accordance with the 2016 CITES agreement. If free trade allows for the most effective allocation of resources and maximizes the production of wealth for the trading communities, the Western world as well Sri Lanka and China would be hurting their economies by imposing restrictions or bans on trade in ivory. But maximization of economic efficiency is never the primary concern of states' economic policies – security is. Thus, fighting against ivory contraband is essential for safety, even if the bans are popularly believed to impoverish both of the trading communities.

¹ Fletcher, Daisy. "Sri Lanka destroys biggest ever illegal ivory haul"
<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/campaigns/GiantsClub/sri-lanka-destroys-biggest-ever-illegal-ivory-haul-a6837376.html>

² Scanlon, John. "China's ivory ban was a big step forward. But we all must do more"
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/06/ivory-trade-bans-are-good-but-not-enough-to-stop-the-poachers-heres-why/>

³ Scanlon, John. "China's ivory ban was a big step forward. But we all must do more"
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In essence, international trade may be considered as subjected to the four superior structures: the structure of security, the structure of production, the structure of money and credit, and the structure of knowledge⁴. A country must first ensure its own security, military production for ensuring that security, stability of currency, and a healthy knowledge economy with enough highly qualified human resources to oversee further economic development, before that country can implement the policies of open trade with neighbors. Prosperity in these four structures would normally allow for a greater degree of liberalization when it comes to trade policies. However, developing countries could not afford open trade because of the need to protect the national producer that might suffer not only from economic instability, but also the lack of security due to unfavorable political conditions.

“Made in Russia” became a slogan of economic failure in the context of the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine. With all supermarkets in Central Ukraine putting a sign “Made in Russia” next to the products manufactured in the now ‘enemy land’, the goods, which typical Ukrainian families used to enjoy on the daily basis, forever remained on the shelves and in the anecdote columns of the Ukrainian newspapers. At the same time, Ukrainians massively turned towards supporting the national producer. So take that invisible hand of the market and shake it with the realization that people do not always act or buy in their best interests. Collective political choices are not always ‘rational’ economically or made in the best general interests⁵, but they reflect an ideology. Where states do not undertake protectionist measures economically, people will do it ideologically. And economies cannot shake hands if their fists are clenched for a political fight.

Eventually, national wealth and power depend on the country’s performance in the world market.⁶ And in juggling with the basic political compounds of wealth, order, justice and freedom, a state finds an appropriate trade-off to promote its economy in the open trade conditions while threatening lives worldwide. In the Volkswagen case, Germany would be that state. The German car giant – Volkswagen – has been installing defeat devices in the engines to improve the test results of cars’ emissions. When a car is tested in the laboratory, the intricate software system of the defeat device recognizes the fact and changes the levels of emissions of the tested car. According to the EU legislation, defeat devices are banned, with national authorities responsible for the reinforcement of the law. Thus, the Federal Motor Transport Authority (KBA) has been accused of covering up Volkswagen’s cheating through the loophole in the EU legislation: defeat devices may be allowed for “protection of the engine”⁷. With Germany being one of the 23 EU Member States breaking the European air quality laws on NO² (mainly produced by traffic)⁸, one should wonder if we will come to the point when governments would protect their citizens better than they protect their engines. Given that the Volkswagen fraud was discovered in the United States, it is understandable that the US President Donald Trump threatened to impose a 35% border tax on vehicles imported to the U.S. market⁹ (one of the very few understandable things that the president has done). And as ridiculously outrageous as the American withdrawal from the Paris Agreement sounds, it may, on

⁴ Strange, Susan. “Protectionism and World Politics.” www.jstor.org/stable/2706709

⁵ Strange, Susan. “Protectionism and World Politics.” www.jstor.org/stable/2706709

⁶ Strange, Susan. “Protectionism and World Politics.” www.jstor.org/stable/2706709

⁷ Hotten, Russel. “Volkswagen: The scandal explained” <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-34324772>

⁸ Crisp, James. “23 EU countries are breaking European air quality laws”.

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/sustainable-dev/news/23-eu-countries-are-breaking-european-air-quality-laws/>

⁹ Taylor, Edward, and Adreas Rinke. “Trump threatens German carmakers with 35 percent U.S. import tariff” <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-germany-autos/trump-threatens-german-carmakers-with-35-percent-u-s-import-tariff-idUSKBN1500VJ>

the pessimistic note, be just one of those sobering moments when the need for agreements dissolves in the realization that the national governments will continue bending the principles of environmental safety and economic growth against these very agreements.

The political compounds of wealth, order, justice and freedom, expressed through economic values, will be assembled into different combinations to form fast- or slow-developing authoritarian, democratic, or pseudo-democratic governments. Carefully designed and formulated loopholes in legislative codes of these governments will give rise to new transnational economic elites, like that of Volkswagen. And if earlier the state had the monopoly over the means of violence, it is now those economic giants exercising economic violence over populations, without the latter realizing it. This kind of violence has lost the physical limitations of a punch or a gunshot which usually have a single target. The economic violence has a massive destructive effect: it gasses people worldwide. Seventy three years ago the regime most openly fond of gassing was defeated. And currently we are facing the task of finding and destroying the ideological bases, if any, for the now covered type of respiratory violence and oppression. For the hungry brains reading this essay, there is still some food for thought: analyzing the business connections of the economic violence monopolists, one should wonder if the most successful partnerships in reality reflect the most ardent targeting – after all there is more gas where there are more cars, sold and driven.

Giving another ride for a tourist in Colombo, Soroo has a cover on his back to facilitate the tourist's comfort – a cloth colored into an American flag. Soroo would never vote for Trump, I assure you. Neither would he chant “Make America great again” under his one remaining tusk. And his tamer, a middle-aged man with one year of primary school education, would not even be able to point at the United States on a map. Through globalization of trade, national and group symbols have lost their meaning or acquired new shades of meaning, leading to an overall downfall of original culture. If the stars and stripes in this case exemplify a loss of culture, the swastika is an illustration of a cultural mal-transformation. Originally a symbol of universal peace and harmony in Buddhism, swastika was stolen by the Nazi regime to signify hatred and antisemitism. What if Soroo, in fact, was a Jew and wore a kippah and his tamer would march him to a Buddhist temple nearby to see a “beautiful swastika” (my own blood is still chilling when reading those two words) laid out flowers on the floor? It would take a lot of years and effort to return swastika to its original meaning. And even so, I am afraid Soroo will not buy those arguments. And some people will still buy the old arguments.

Fortunately for the lovers of real street art, there is no longer any need of covering every inch of walls with propaganda posters. People do not want to be simply shown propaganda as they walk the streets – they want to walk these streets purposefully to a place where they can spend the money they earned buying propaganda and savoring the choice of the propaganda items. With the globalization and digitalization of trade, the life of these people get even easier: they can buy their dose of propaganda online. Despite its own policy against selling offensive items, the Etsy retailer has been accused of having on sale 456 swastika-themed items, 479 Hitler-themed goods, 13 Ku Klux Klan-themed goods and a candlestick with a Jewish caricature specifically under the topic ‘anti-Semitic’.¹⁰ Any kind of item which bears the visual identity of hatred serves a double purpose: it performs its primary function and it spreads hatred. Through organized distribution of hatred-filled produce, businesses can cause the culture of hatred towards selected groups to resurface.

¹⁰ Ho, Spencer. “Online retailer has almost 1,000 Nazi-themed items for sale” <https://www.timesofisrael.com/online-retailer-has-almost-1000-nazi-themed-items-for-sale/>

Seemingly, people would not be susceptible to the hatred symbolism after so many years of education for diversity and bans on verbal and visual hate speech. But it is when you think you know everything about propaganda and you are protected from it that you are actually the most vulnerable to its effects. And the easiest way for a hateful idea to enter one's mind is through visuals. Since prehistoric times, humans have developed an innate visual literacy, which can be defined as the ability to understand the persuasive devices of visual communication.¹¹ This was possible due to the natural need for imagery which is connected to the need to represent, express, communicate, analyze ideas and emotions internally or share them with the world.¹² Thus, the universality and innateness of imagery create possibilities for visual intelligence to be abused, while the objects of hatred gracefully transcend political and linguistic borders to be understood even by illiterate or semi-literate people who are naturally masters of visual understanding. Visuals of hatred are also loaded with behavioral context, meaning they produce associations with certain courses of action. Constant exposure to the same symbolic visual content reinforces those pathways in human brains which correspond to the associated actions, the phenomenon being called plasticity. Such reinforcement makes the exposed individuals prone to performing the associated actions in real life. To make special arrangements to expose individuals to visual stimuli of hatred, therefore, would be to create the false need of expression of the negativity. And because the processes happening in the brain of one individual as they look at art are almost identical to those happening in the brain of another¹³, nationalistic, xenophobic and extremist behavior is massively reflected in social actions and ideology. It may be one of the many reasons, for people to vote for nationalist parties, as it has been happening in Italy, France, Finland, and Austria. Generally, fabrication of false needs like that is an act of repression of individuals, which is made possible by the economic arrangements on unrestricted trade online. Allow me, however, to also pitch my argument in a visual manner with the cartoons exclusively designed for this essay to inspire understanding and love for Soroo and his story of escape from poachers¹⁴:

Up to this point, the conversation seems to have been carried away into the fields of politics, culture



¹¹ Taken from another work I did for AUBG

¹² Kindler, Anna M. "Visual Culture, Visual Brain, and (Art) Education www.jstor.org/stable/1321015. Taken from another work I wrote for AUBG

¹³ Zeki, Semir. *Inner vision: An exploration of art and the brain*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1999. Taken from another work I wrote for AUBG

¹⁴ All graphics were created by the author of this essay.

studies, environmental science, neuroscience, art and creative writing, but it never really left the trail of economic protectionism, or the lack of it. The truth is that economics has become so pervasive that it influences every aspect of human life and its traces can be found in every field of human occupation. Having extensively discussed the negative implications of economic mal-regulations, I would still like to point out several alternative protectionism-free ways to re-boost and upkeep the growth on national and global economies.

Firstly, world trade rules must be reformulated to avoid loopholes as well expanded and enforced to eliminate machinations by national and global actors.

Secondly, the economies of developing countries that are now in recess need to be revitalized to create a general atmosphere of prosperity, which would allow for a greater degree of liberalization of trade and a greater degree of transparency in the national economic policies.

And thirdly, there is a need for adjustment of individuals to the dynamic and often turbulent global economy. This can be achieved through specially designed initial education and up-skilling programs to increase the flexibility and therefore competitiveness of workers by implementing the principles of life-long learning and interdisciplinarity. One of the best examples of education for life and a healthy economy is the American University in Bulgaria. The very fact that having studied arts, history, languages, literature, math, politics, economics, journalism and computer science I am now able to develop this argument proves the degree of resourcefulness and creativity of AUBG students, so much needed for success in the modern economy.

While sitting in this sink and typing this essay, I have been thinking back to all the aggressive economics-based actions that fueled international violent conflicts. In 1915, an American merchant ship named *William P. Frye* was stopped by a German cruiser. The crew of the American ship was ordered to sink all of its wheat cargo which seemed as contraband to the Germans.¹⁵ As one of the very first German moves against the American trade interests, the tactics continued to upset other countries during the world wars and fueled the conflict. After all, international trade is one of the first vulnerable spots to be hit, both positively in peaceful liberalization and negatively in the restrictions of the war. Protectionism may be an instrument to bring about safety or to set a war loose, all depending on the context. I think that wheat got to the bottom of the ocean since the sink seems to be clogged now and the levels of the ocean are rising (also all because of protectionism – who would have thought). It is time for me to get out of here. Have a nice day.

¹⁵ “Germans sink American merchant ship” <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/germans-sink-american-merchant-ship>

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