Chapter 38

A World without Borders

THE CHAPTER IN PERSPECTIVE

The cold war came to an end with the collapse of the communist regimes in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Suddenly the bipolar political system that had dominated world politics for a half century was no more. New opportunities arose, but they were joined with new, more unpredictable problems. Distances between countries came to mean nothing in an age of rapid cultural and technological change. Cultural integration was fueled by television, computers, and the Internet. Women worldwide strove to improve their conditions and expand their opportunities. A population explosion called into question the viability of the earth. The people of the planet tentatively stepped into a world without traditional boundaries.

OVERVIEW

The Global Economy

Latin American states, despite the absence of industrialization on a western European or American scale, expanded economically throughout the middle years of the century before being crippled by massive foreign debt in the 1970s and 1980s. In the end, the countries of Latin America were left dependent on European or American investment. Sub-Saharan Africa, hampered by the highest birthrate in the world and the lack of an efficient financial or industrial infrastructure, found itself in even worse shape than Latin America. The Japanese economy exploded in the decades after World War II. Deng Xiaoping’s reforms brought impressive economic growth in the 1980s. The “four little tigers”—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—rose to become major world competitors. Economic alliances such as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade became important economic factors, as did regional trading alliances such as ASEAN and NAFTA.

Cross-Cultural Exchanges and Global Communications

While the fall of the Berlin Wall signified the smashing of traditional political boundaries, cultural and technological innovations had begun erasing boundaries far earlier. The story of the competition between the American Barbie, Iranian Sara, and Japanese Licca perfectly expresses both the pervasive nature of American culture and the fear in many parts of the world of that cultural imperialism. More and more the world is becoming a consumer society, which of course means more than simply buying enough subsistence items to survive. Modern consumption means that consumers buy more than they need and that what they buy has some symbolic value for them. Americanization (or McDonaldization) implies that American consumer society has effectively permeated into every corner of the globe and has led to a partial and increasing homogenization of global culture. The great problem is that this influence essentially acts like cultural imperialism, and it stands as a threat to indigenous cultures around the globe.

This process is exacerbated by the increasing influence of television, computers, and the Internet. This era has become the age of access. The dominance of English as the language of technology and of the Internet forces worldwide users to learn English or be left out. In an act reminiscent of the building of the Great Wall, the Chinese are trying to build a computer fire wall (fenghuo qiang), or “net wall” (wangguan), around the country to keep the unwanted American presence in the Internet out. In turn, however, some other countries and leaders are embracing the new technology as a means of propaganda.
Global Problems

Arguably the world’s greatest challenge as it enters into a new millennium is the population explosion that threatens the very existence of the planet. The population has increased from 2.5 billion in 1950 to over 5.5 billion today. In some developing countries the rate of annual population growth stands at a staggering 3.1 percent. Estimates suggest that the population of the earth will finally stabilize at around 11.6 billion by 2200. However, if the present birthrate goes unchecked, the world would have a staggeringly huge and unsustainable 700 billion people by 2150. The question becomes, what is the carrying capacity of the earth (i.e., what can the earth sustain)? The creation of a sustainable society, recognizing the delicate nature of biodiversity and taking into account dangers such as global warming, is a necessary challenge for the new millennium. Mass migrations of people, both internal and external, and the growth of international organizations such as Greenpeace and the United Nations continue to tear down boundaries, both literally and figuratively, and change the nature of life on earth. The threat posed by HIV/AIDS continues to be staggering. In the year 2000 over thirty-six million adults and children were living with HIV/AIDS. Eighty percent of the children with HIV/AIDS were in Africa. The attack and destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 brought home the grave threat of global terrorism. The United States essentially declared war on Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda.

Crossing Boundaries

Many more boundaries than simply political ones are being breached in today’s world. Women around the world are challenging traditional assumptions and fighting for better working and living conditions. Gender equality has been slow to come to the industrialized world and is almost unheard of in the developing world. Women form up to half the workforce in the industrialized world, but only around one-fifth in the developing world and less than one-tenth in the Islamic world. Part of the fight for better conditions for women was the desire for greater control over their own reproductive systems. Strides have been made in this area, but it has been a slow process. The passage of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, which declared discrimination based on race or sex illegal, was a major step forward for American women. At the same time, the Equal Rights Amendment was never ratified. The only countries in the world that transformed their legal systems to make sure that women received basic equality were the communist and socialist countries. Even here, however, there existed a gulf between the theory and the reality. The Chinese one-child family rule was designed to slow China’s population growth and provide women greater opportunities. One of the unexpected problems with this rule was the large number, up to a half million a year, of “missing” baby girls. This situation is still being debated, but the theory is that the extreme pressure for male children in China has caused baby girls to be given up for adoption, be raised secretly, or become victims of selective infanticide. The situation is even worse for women in south Asia, where the percentage of women in the workforce stands at less than 12 percent and where dowry death is a major problem. In other areas women are doing much better. Female political leaders such as Indira Gandhi of India, Benazir Bhuto of Pakistan, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar have played major roles.