Spring 2005

Whether It Is Morally Permissible

Anthony Wilder

College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: http://dc.cod.edu/essai

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol3/iss1/33
In today’s global marketplace, the world is shrinking faster than ever before. More and more agrarian nations are becoming industrialized societies. With these transformations comes the need to find some type of comparative advantage in the global marketplace. Unfortunately, being several hundred years behind the industrial revolution, these nations lack the materials and cognitive resources to compete globally.

However, the newly emerging industrial nations have one absolute advantage over the many industrialized nations and that is an overabundance of uneducated and unskilled labor perfect for labor-intensive manufacturing operations. Many of these countries are willing to exploit their citizens in exchange for monies and a solid foothold into the global economy.

This foothold comes at a significant price to the inhabitants of these countries. When a foreign government is willing to exploit its own citizens, a question must be addressed by the more advanced societies: Whether it is morally permissible for businesses to exploit poverty-stricken nations for low cost manufacturing. As an American citizen, like other American citizens, I place a significant importance on the morality of any given issue. The exploitation of labor in impoverished nations, in my point of view, is absolutely wrong and out of line.

Exploitation, like many words in the American language, can be ambiguous. It can have positive as well as negative connotations. Depending on the context in which it is used, to exploit can either mean to use well or, in direct contrast, to mean unfair use. For the purpose of this essay, the definition of exploitation will be defined as unfair usage.

Morality is a guide to behavior by the members of a society. A better definition might be an ethical motive, which is motivationally based upon right and wrong. Morality can be simply defined as treating others with the same regard that you would wish in return. American business does not fall anywhere in the realm of these definitions. American business favors capitalistic morality, which states everyone is responsible for their own well-being. “And one’s only path forward is by making whatever voluntary contracts one can” (Banarjee). Capitalistic morality is basically the same as Darwinism and has very little to do with actual morality involved.

Like America and other industrialized societies, the journey from agrarian to industrialization should better the lives of the people undergoing the transformation. This however is not the case in many poverty-stricken nations. Because of the immorality of corporate America, there has begun a moral “race to the bottom” (Chan). Poverty-stricken countries are vying for the seemingly unlimited U.S. investment dollars, and they are willing to entice companies by lowering the already low standards of living in their countries. There is no thought or concern for the advancement of their citizens.

In 1970, the U.S. enacted the Clean Air Act and in 1972 The Clean Water Act. Because American companies were acting so morally irresponsibly, the government foresaw the need to
legislate these areas. American corporations were forced by law to become model citizens and act responsibly.

This increased scrutiny led to the need to find a more lenient place to manufacture products. One country welcoming U.S. manufacturing and U.S. dollars is Mexico. Mexico is willing to look the other way while American, Japanese, and European maquiladoras pollute the air and waterways of the country. Many companies in the United States choose to operate in Mexican border towns because of the lack of environmental regulations. Plating companies, which produce byproducts like cyanide, especially appreciate the relaxed (mostly non-existent) environmental controls. Without an organization like the E.P.A., companies are free to dump their hazardous chemicals right onto the ground. This has in turn begun to create severe health problems to the citizens of Mexico.

If it were morally acceptable to dump the byproducts of the manufacturing industry onto the ground, then U.S. companies would be able to dispose of their waste in that manner in America. The E.P.A. forbids the dumping of hazardous materials in the United States. Thus, it cannot be moral for corporations to dump hazardous chemicals onto the ground in the United States. Since it is morally wrong for American companies to pollute the United States, then it is equally wrong for American companies to pollute in other countries. American society says it is morally wrong to pollute the air and water in the United States. Therefore, it must be equally wrong for American companies to pollute other nations’ air and water supplies. There is no ethical or moral rationalization that can be made for poisoning one country for the financial benefit of another.

Even more disturbing and morally reprehensible than the pollution is the exploitation of human beings by corporate America. As stated earlier, there have been laws governing labor in the United States for almost 200 years. Since Americans place an utmost importance on fair labor, it would seem that they would hold other nations accountable for poor labor conditions as well. This is not the case. Americans continue to purchase goods form U.S. companies that make their profit margins by capitalizing on human misery.

American corporations should not be allowed to quarry impoverished peoples in order to increase profits and bring products to the American people at lower prices. Since its transformation from agrarian to an industrialized society, the U.S. has enacted several labor laws. Because of the inhumane and immoral working conditions in early U.S. factories, there was necessity for the enactment of labor laws. Moreover, as far back as 1883, the U.S. has been enacting laws like the law banning children from working in textile mills. Based on the fact that the U.S. passed these laws, it is not wrong to say that the U.S. places a significant moral responsibility on corporations for adequate labor conditions. Considering the American workers’ labor struggles, it follows that Americans should place a great emphasis on fair labor and working conditions throughout the world.

In today’s marketplace, it is very difficult to pick up a product that is not made in Asia. With the current poor condition of the financial market, Americans are increasingly sensitive to the origins of the products they are purchasing. Since the job market in the U.S. has dwindled, the battle cry has become “stop shipping our jobs overseas.” Yet, they still buy the products produced by American companies manufactured overseas never questioning how the products are made so cheaply. The cheap prices that Americans enjoy come at the expense of other human beings. America as a whole has seen fit to abolish all forms of unconscionable labor. Some types of labor like child and slave were abolished over one hundred year ago. In today’s society neither child or slave labor would be tolerated. In fact, whenever a case of either
becomes known in the United States, it is met with great disdain and moral reprehension, it completely saturates the news. A perfect example is the coverage on the sweatshops in California. American society has an immense distaste for forced labor and child labor.

Since Americans place such a high value on an individual’s life, the following argument can be made. If Americans condemn child and slave labor in the United States, then child and slave labor is morally wrong to the citizens of the United States. If child and slave labor is wrong to the citizens of the U.S., then child and slave labor in the rest of the world should also be morally wrong to the citizens of the U.S. Therefore, if Americans condemn child and slave labor in the United States, then child and slave labor in the rest of the world should also be morally wrong to the citizens of the U.S. This is a strong argument, but very few people follow its rational.

In the midst of an overwhelming abundance of product inflow from Asia, Americans enjoy the luxury of purchasing products at cheap prices. However, these cheap prices are coming at the very expense and the very conditions Americans have fought so long and hard to abolish. One counter argument that is always used to try to refute and justify the morality of foreign labor practices is that it costs much less to live in these foreign countries. It is a true statement that the cost of living is lower in most of these countries. Nevertheless, what is often overlooked are the actual wages being paid to these individuals and the conditions they are subjected to earn their wages. A perfect example is the Qin Shi handbag factory in China that produces products for companies like Wal-Mart. Workers labor 12 to 14 hours per day, seven days a week for 3 cents an hour and are only allowed outside the fenced in compound for one and a half hours a day. That is roughly three dollars per week. After deductions for room and board, they are left with almost nothing.

The toy industry in China is also guilty of these moral atrocities. “During the ‘busy season’ in China, three million toy workers – mostly young women – will be locked inside 2,800 factories. They will be forced to work 15 hours a day, 7 days a week, 30 days a month, handling toxic chemicals with their bare hands” (“Toys of Misery”). And for all of their work in the appalling conditions, they are awarded with 12 cents an hour (“Toys of Misery”). However, after a varying array of fines and being cheated out of overtime pay, they are left with very little.

“The International Labor Organization estimates that 250 million children between the ages of five and fourteen work in developing countries” (“Children’s Rights”). This number includes the approximately 5 million children who are debt bonded in India (“Human Collateral”). Debt bonded is just a politically correct way of saying slavery. Debt bonding “occurs when a person becomes a security against a debt or small loan” (“Human Collateral”). These loans are usually for the basic necessities of life like food and medical care. With exorbitant interest rates reaching 60%, individuals are forced to work in harsh conditions to repay the debt. This indebtedness is what leads to four-year-old children being tied to rug looms. Throughout America’s short history, there has been a great moral obligation placed on its citizens. One only has to look to the Declaration of Independence and the statement: “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” The Bill of Rights reaffirms these concepts. Many third world poverty-stricken countries violate human rights in order to profit from their citizens’ misery. Since America places a high standard on human life, it would reason that any violation of these rights anywhere in the world would be intolerable to U.S. citizens. With the great hardships and strife American workers have endured, it is easy to sympathize with the struggles of newly industrializing
nations. Since Americans fought long and hard for labor reform and fair labor conditions, we may conclude that it is not morally permissible to exploit poverty-stricken nations for low cost manufacturing when they are struggling with the same inhumane working conditions we will not tolerate for Americans.

References