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French-Fried Friedman, Nouvelle Globalizer

by Greg Palast

Vicente Fox got a well-deserved boot in the derriere for saying Mexicans come to America for taking jobs "not even Blacks want to do."

But Thomas Friedman earns plaudits and Pulitzers for his column which today announces that East Indians are taking jobs the French are too lazy to do ["A Race to the Top," New York Times, June 3]. His fit of racial profiling was motivated by his pique over France's rejection of the globalizers' charter for corporate dominance known as the European Constitution.

It's not the implicit racism of Friedman's statement which is most irksome, it's his ghastly glee that "a world of benefits they [Western Europeans] have known for 50 years is coming apart," because the French and other Europeans "are trying to preserve a 35 hour work week in a world where Indian engineers are ready to work a 35-hour day."

He forgot to add, "and where Indian families are ready to sell their children into sexual slavery to survive." Now, THERE'S a standard to reach for.

In his endless series of pukey peons to globalization, Friedman promises that free trade, an end of regulation, slashing government welfare and privatization of industry will lead to an economic nirvana.

Yet, all he and his globalization clique can point to as the free market's accomplishment is the murderous competition between workers across borders to cut their wages for the chance to work in the new digital sweatshops.

Friedman praises the New India, freed of the shackles of Old India's socialist welfare state. I've seen the New India: half a billion people in dirt huts supporting a tiny minority's right to shop in air-conditioned malls. It is a Fritz Lang film in Hindi.

There is, of course, a hopeful, growing India where the much-heralded cyber work is based. But, Mr. Friedman, please note these brains for hire are found in Karnataka and Kerala, states whose cussed adherence to social welfare makes them more French than France and nothing like Thatcherized dog-eat-dog Britain or Reaganized America.

The computer wizards of Bangalore (in Karnataka) and Kerala are the products of fully funded state education systems where, unlike the USA, no child is left behind. A huge apparatus of state-owned or state-controlled industries, redistributionist tax systems, subsidies of necessities from electricity to food, tight government regulation and affirmative action programs for the lower castes are what has created these comfortable refuges for Oracle and Microsoft.

And the successful Indian states, unlike the dreadful free-market Uttar Pradesh, have labor unions so tough they make the French CGT look like a luncheon club of baguette biters.

A few years ago, I dropped in on a fishing village in Kerala in Southern India. Most fisherman worked from motorless dug-out log boats. Their language is Malayalam, but a large banner slung between two coconut trees announced in English, "WordPerfect applications class today." After they brought in the catch, the locals practiced programming on cardboard replicas of keyboards.

What made this all possible was not capitalist competitive drive (there was no corporate "entrepreneur" in sight), but the state's investment in universal education and the village's commitment to development of opportunity, not of a lucky few, but for the entire community. The village was 100% literate, 100% unionized, and 100% committed to sharing resources through a sophisticated credit union finance operation.

This was the communal welfare state at it's best. Microsoft did not build the schools for programmers -- the corporation only harvested what the socialist communities sowed.

The economist Amartya Sen won the Nobel Prize in 1998 for predicting that Southern India, with it's strong communalist social welfare state, would lead the economic advance of South Asia -- and do so without the Thatcherite sleight-of-hand of pretending that riches for the few equates to progress for the many.

When I asked the fisherman on their way to programming lessons what the West could do to encourage their efforts, they did not suggest privatizing Kerala's social security system. Rather -- and this was before the Seattle demonstrations of 1999 brought the World Trade Organization to the West's attention -- they called for the abolition of the WTO and greater protection for their wooden fishing fleet against the foreign factory boats marauding in their waters. With protective trade barriers, they could do as the US did for a hundred years: build up local resources and industry that creates the infrastructure of growth.

And the programmers themselves do not dream, Mr. Friedman, of stealing work from indolent Frenchmen or slothful Seattle geeks. Indians are not in love with the new method of brain-drain by satellite. They would hope for the opportunity to write code in their own languages for their own industries.

Friedman ends with the typical globalizer's warning that, "it's a bad time for France and friends to lose their appetite for hard work," or they will lose their jobs to Indians and Chinese willing to work for noodles. What Friedman means is that the French should give up their taste for old age pensions, universal health care, top-quality public education, protection of their skies and waters and all those things we used to call advances but now, according to the Friedman world order, stand in the way of progress.

It is too bad that the Times' opinion columns have not been outsourced to India. Were it so, a Keralite might explain to Friedman that human advances are measured not by our willingness to crawl lower and lower to buy ourselves a job from Bill Gates, or by counting the number of Gap outlets in Delhi, but by our success in protecting and nurturing liberté, égalité and fraternité among all humanity.

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