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INTRODUCTION

A Declaration of Interdependence

PANIC SEIZED the world. Deadly plague spread from Hong Kong to San Francisco. Drought struck northeastern Brazil and the breadbaskets of Russia. Unemployment, strikes, massacres, pogroms—there was even a Broadway play about ruinous bank runs. Newspaper headlines worldwide screamed calamity. Painters turned their palettes away from telluric countrysides to grim landscapes of overtilled fields worked by back-broken peasants. These were years of fear—fear of food and fuel shortages, alarm about losing money, financial turmoil, and unease about migrants from far-flung places. Governments slapped tariffs on trading partners and, with the help of new devices like machine guns and barbed wire, commanders sent soldiers to far-away places to kill people who spoke different languages. The extermination of native peoples reached a gruesome acme. Other new devices transformed how people learned about how blood was spilled and money was lost on the other side of the world. Cheap newspapers, long-distance cables, and portable cameras brought the remote up close. They globalized a *grande peur*, particularly fear of being overwhelmed by foreigners—and fear of being killed by them. The planet felt smaller and more dangerous at the same time.

These were the tumultuous years of the 1890s, a transition from the optimism of a Victorian past to doubt about the future. The buoyancy

of Jules Verne's thrilling adventures in unfamiliar lands (*Around the World in Eighty Days* rolled off the press in 1872) gave way to H. G. Wells's visions of a dying Earth, dystopian futures, and pathogenic horror (*The War of the Worlds* hit bookstands in ominous 1898). Today, we scroll through a limitless supply of digitally enhanced variations on Wells's fears of invasion and extraterrestrial extraction wars. We live in times of escalating fear of atmospheric rifts, predatory politics, and everyday graphics of extermination.

Part of the very nature of panics is for people living within them to fail to see them in context, to be unable to see that what feels like end-times is more often a turning point, a difficult and uncertain transition rather than grand finale. The search for context and meaning is what motivates this book, to understand the rhyming emotions of the past two centuries. To remember earlier anxious and angry times puts our present into perspective. It reminds us that fear always duelled with other emotions, like joy and excitement, that serviced alternative visions of the future on our planet.

Heated emotions, not just the cold calculus of self-interest, have governed how strangers have regarded and treated each other in the capitalist era. Sentiment and self-interest coiled together to shape the rhythms of world capitalism while animating the great debates and contradictions that made and unmade the Global Mind.

This book is a history of how we humans grew to share Earth, whether we like it or not. Strangers are tied together in their search for food, fuel, security, respect, and ideas. This is nothing new for a social species. But the scale of mutual dependence wrought by modern capitalism has changed radically since the industrial revolution. As have the stakes. The scale and stakes involved in depending on strangers have provoked warring feelings—fear and excitement, sympathy and suspicion; the intensity of mutual need produces visions of one-world utopias and existential dread, as well as indifference, confusion, and exhaustion. That war has been conducted as much in our heads as on the ground, high seas, and in the skies. Lately, the sentiment has settled on gloom. A former global optimist slumped into despair. We need fewer pundits and more therapists who, he moaned, “can help us accept who we are.”¹

One temptation is to define this emotional spectrum in terms of its extremes. Grim and foreboding nativists warn of an apocalypse: get back to basics of blood-and-soil loyalties to nation and tribe or face extinction from cultural and demographic annihilation by migrant hordes or unfair economic competition. At the other extreme are one-world universalists for whom only selfless solidarity will redeem humanity from another sort of extinction: ecological ruin or engulfing war. Each extreme has its preferred narrative populated with saviors and villains.

Left out of these narratives are the actual outsiders: the people who are either a threat or in dire need of saving. Because *they* are so needy, they are reduced to cartoonish figures disfigured by stereotypes about strangers. In photographic terms, we need to widen the lens so that strangers who have been left out of the story come into view—to see that they too have relevant and deeply mixed feelings about sharing the planet with “us” because we need them.

Widening the frame has consequences for what we see and how we see. For starters, it means admitting frictions that are intrinsic to the modern condition, the contested necessities of modern life. For the past two centuries, the choice has *not* been whether to live in the purity of the tribe-nation or the bliss of one-world. The choice has been about managing tensions between them. Strangers have often disagreed and fought precisely because they needed what the other had; that’s what makes necessity contested. Technologies, markets, and flows of ideas created a *unity* of the world without *unifying* it.

Either-Or

Each side has self-serving blind spots. Tribalists have to reckon with a large avoidance. To claim that one could be independent and restore in-group autonomy without giving up what strangers contribute is to perpetuate an illusion that one might live without the constraints of dependence while enjoying its benefits. At best, this is thoughtless, at worst, malicious. It leads dependent people to take and to deny they are taking. Denial is a step toward dehumanizing those upon whom one depends.

One-worlders also have reckoning to do. Accepting the fractured unity of a world of strangers challenges a universalist dream: the creation of a posthistorical polity integrated under one value system in which humans work together as “global citizens.” This oneness fantasy erases the differentiated world of strangers who negotiate, quarrel, and bicker over the distribution of their needs. It denies a self-interest in gain from others, which lies behind the urge to manage, control, and to dominate the people we need. Redemption does not lie waiting as if strangers will all get along because they need each other. Out of *this* denial grows an aversion to accept the toll it asks of others and its own form of cruelty, especially on strangers who never asked to be part of someone else’s vision.

The debates that splinter us have never been about interdependence or independence. This dichotomy is misleading. It is dangerous. To be independent would mean poverty, indigence, and shortened, less creative lives; few large-scale social experiments in modern history have truly pursued this regression to isolation. Think Pol Pot in Cambodia. What is more, declarations of independence have never been announcements of solitude, a call to return to a metaphoric island. Rather, they are requests from free people for recognition from other free strangers and pleas for entry into interdependence on their own, undictated terms—and requests from unfree people for recognition of their claims to freedom.

The debate about how we need strangers and how they need us has really been, and remains, about what kind of interdependence should prevail. Will or should the world order be more inclusive, with relatively open borders and welcoming arms? Or will it be predatory and hierarchical, with us grabbing what we need from others while and when we can? How to balance inclusion with hierarchy? What mix of self-interest and sympathy will govern how strangers treat each other?

These questions have challenged us many times over. For over two centuries, our search for answers—fueled by a potent cocktail of compassion, jealousy, fear, and anguish—has shaped the policies, norms, and institutions that regulate our world. With those guidance systems teetering, the questions that gave them force confront us again now.

After two centuries of history, the time has come to square up to the fact that strangers carry mixed feelings about each other; the Global

Mind has always been split. Universalists may tout one-world dreams of unity and the virtues of caring for needy strangers, but they have been less than saintly about their interests and methods. For their part, tribalists may claim to care foremost for their own kin, clan, or nation, while blaming strangers for their misfortunes, but they obscure the ways they need strangers, sometimes loathe them because they need them, and yet find ways occasionally to welcome them.

The either-or style that dominates our arguments misses the essence of interdependent life: to need strangers for survival is to lend strangers a measure of control over resources, over information, over recognition. That is a discomforting condition. It is also inescapable. To be interdependent elicits inner tension no matter who you are because you submit to others a capacity to affect your lifeway. At least among neighbors and citizens there are forums and rituals, from parliaments to parishes, for agreeing upon the rules of sharing life and how to contest them. This is untrue of the ties across societies and among strangers. Whatever one thinks of the United Nations, arms control agencies, climate monitors, or global charities and banks, they do not share the convoking power or legitimacy of neighborly or national affiliations; there is little room for democratic exchange and contestation over technical rules managing global supply chains and vaccine inventories, or nuclear proliferation and carbon emissions, rules that really do determine life-and-death matters like access to vaccines or risks of atomic bombs.

For two centuries, integration across borders reduced dependence among neighbors and augmented dependence among strangers. A gap opened between our needs and our control over the ways we meet them.²

The gap has filled with an unstable mixture of cooperation and competition, sharing and hoarding. The balance has shifted and changed over the generations. But one thing is true about the making of the modern world: the mixture has never given way to extremes of one-world unification or a return to blessed isolation. Simplified dichotomies have obscured the real tensions over power and control, over who gets to reap the rewards of interdependence and who distributes the costs. It is time we reckon with our mixed selves, our contested necessity. It is time to reckon with the real turmoil at the heart of an interdependent world.

To help with the reckoning, we need tools. Some come from earlier reflections on the dilemma of interdependence. This book relies on insights from earlier transitions, some of them perilous. One sociologist writing in the late 1930s, Norbert Elias, observed the working of what he called the “affect economy.”³ By affect economy, Elias was referring to the feelings that bind or separate members of society to and from each other, the emotions that glue them together in common pursuits or drive them apart—and at times lead to savagery. A German-born Jew writing from exile in Britain, Elias observed how growing interdependence between peoples augmented the division of their social functions; as people specialized in different tasks and roles, they became more proficient and productive. This expanded the radius of the population brought “into dependence on one another.” In this way, interdependence created wealth, science, art, and poetry. But it also spurred shame, repugnance, and fear “of other peoples’ gestures of superiority.” Unleashed, fears about being controlled by others might lead to aggression, thwarting or even ruining the rewards of interdependence. Which of the jostling emotions would prevail? The answer to that question, Elias argued in his 1939 classic, *The Civilizing Process*, depended on learning moderation, nurturing manners, and developing the ability to curb “spontaneous [negative] impulses and emotions.” Fears, anxieties, and resentments still lurked within. After all, more interdependence meant more need for others and more vulnerability to their possible disdain; to manage these feelings required restraint and self-control.⁴

Herein lay a drama of modern life: the struggle over how to regulate the combustible mixture of attachment and fear in a world in which people needed what others had. Many of the actors, norms, and institutions created over the past two centuries have been designed precisely to moderate and to manage the global limbic system through a combination of restraint and reward.

Independence as a Euphemism for Hierarchy

That internal regulatory system, what humans created and learned through experience, has had to contend with a big challenge: moderating emotions was no guarantee that the stranger would behave in the

same way. Interdependence—the word itself is a problem. Start with the prefix, “inter-.” Inter- means that what is needed for survival and recognition flows both ways, unlike “dependence,” which evokes the idea that reliance goes only in one direction.

Adding inter- challenges assumptions about the other, often more uplifting prefix, “in-.” *Independence*. Such a clear, such a certain, word. To grow up and develop means, like saying goodbye to childhood, moving from dependence to independence. To be dependent connotes stuntedness, immaturity, underdevelopment, as if being mature meant autonomy and self-determination. Becoming free has meant breaking away from the control of others, to be unconstrained, a master of one’s fate. It has been the credo of secessionists for centuries, from the champions of American “independence” in 1776, to Brexiteering in 2015, to President Donald J. Trump’s Liberation Day announcement of massive tariffs on trading partners. The language of the nation has become the vernacular of resistance. Remember the slogan of the 2015 Brexit campaign in Britain, “Take Back Control,” as if there was once control and, even more, as if it never implied controlling others.

The prefix *in*-dependence creates the comforting illusion that one can live without others. It also conveniently obscures the hierarchy that has been part of the modern capitalist world; in the shadow of becoming “independent,” the grown-ups and the sovereigns all too often defined their autonomy by subordinating, if not exploiting, others, hoarding benefits and externalizing the costs of their needs. Independence has been a euphemism for extraction: power imbalance and hierarchy create incentives for the powerful to claim a greater share of the pie at the expense of the powerless, often in the name of pursuing independence or a natural civilizational hierarchy. For centuries, it has also been a bottomless well into which the aggrieved have dipped their buckets to explain their resentment—against outsiders’ deceit, competitors’ duplicity, and insiders’ disloyalty. Resentment reflects the sense of having given more than they got in the exchange with strangers. The reflex is to declare independence, when what the declarers really yearn for is interdependence on their terms.⁵

Interdependence is also slippery. It is often taken to imply reliance among equals and dismissed as a utopian’s pipedream. In practice—and

in theory—symmetry is as rare as it is fleeting. What is more, societies might *pursue* asymmetry to extract better terms from strangers and are motivated to do so because they are interdependent. This insight came from a Berlin-born economist Albert O. Hirschman in the 1930s. Like Elias, he worried about the fragility of the world. Hirschman observed the ways Adolf Hitler, in the name of national security, wrung what he could out of neighbors to the south and east of the Third Reich to extort his way to rebuilding imperial grandeur, to make Germany great again. He noted that concentrations of power stirred and rewarded bullies—even if, as he hoped, Hitler were defeated. Having enlisted on the Spanish Republican side during the Civil War and the French army to stop a Nazi invasion—all while penning his thoughts on the nexus between international trade and national power—Hirschman dreamed of a post-war peace, one in which powerful sovereigns learned some basic lessons about the economic causes of war. The lessons began with a recognition of the benefits of restraining themselves or, even better, submitting to international rules and guardrails that had the authority to restrain them from abusing their economic muscle. What would be the point of winning a war against dictatorship only to concede the peace to new economic bullies? If the virtue of self-restraint was one lesson, the other lesson was about the vitality of openness so that smaller, more vulnerable, countries had a diversity of partners that enabled them to wiggle out of coercive impositions that the powerful were always tempted to wield.⁶

Fast-forward: it was not accidental that nativist champions of the twenty-first century spoke in terms of restoring national greatness after globalization. They sprinkled the pixie dust of “security” over just about everything from trade and technology to migration and public health to justify hierarchy. “Taking Back Control,” the slogan of Brexiteers in Britain, had not-so-vague appeals to memories of empire. On the U.S. side, the rhetoric of “Make America Great Again” never bothered hiding nostalgia for a time in which “America” could tell others what to do; that’s what made it great. Russian leaders nursed a history of past greatness and eyed the breakaway republics like Ukraine as disloyal children. Chinese leaders have their variant on grandeur. Even small countries with outsized military strength, like Israel, fall prey to the temptations

to hail a vision of sacred unity to justify grabbing the land of strangers. Calls to redeem a glorious past worry less about the freedom of others than they exude melancholy for hierarchy and restored virility that had been drained by the deceit and disloyalty of others and their self-interests hiding behind a globalist veneer.⁷ These word games were such effective responses to the risks of globalization because they portrayed strangers as carpetbagging threats, the real menace to the nation; after all, strangers are the ones with needs, not us! With such simple *independence* formulae within reach, why bother with the messy, unsatisfying moral burdens of *interdependence*? Why not invoke the magical word *independence* as cover for restoring asymmetrical interdependence?

It is misguided to see backlashing—then and now—as expressions of yearning for splendid isolation. What backlashers have wanted is *not* separation from the world, a divorce from strangers. They do not want to forfeit the benefits that come from interdependence; they want interdependence on their own terms, free of the need to cooperate with, sacrifice for, or listen to strangers, free to deal with risk and threat by hoarding from strangers and calling it *independence*. After all, “nation-first” implies that other nations come second, third, last. “Nation-first” denotes hierarchy and control by the powerful over the powerless—coercive interdependence, not blissful independence. “The president is unwavering in his commitment to restore American manufacturing and global dominance,” proclaimed Donald Trump’s press secretary Karoline Leavitt two months after his return to the White House in early 2025. “The America-last globalist era is ending,” to be replaced by an “America-first economic agenda.”⁸

If there is solidarity, nation-firsters envision a collusive comradeship of superior nations, races, and creeds prevailing over others. In the nineteenth century, as the first half of this book will show, it was a club of white, European, self-anointed civilizing empires who looked upon the rest as subordinate. Nowadays, the club is less racially striped, though there are some who yearn for bygone days of white, Anglo-Saxon hegemony. But it is no less clubby, no less inclined to carve the world into great power spheres. When the prime minister of Canada, in the sobriety of his dark suit and tie, went to the podium at the World Economic

Forum on January 20, 2026, he invoked a “rupture” in the world, a break from a cooperative era wrapped in a “fiction” that great powers would restrain themselves. In a setting habituated to proclaiming the virtues of sharing from the gilded halls of Davos, Mark Carney laid bare not a future, but the present of bare-knuckled geopolitics, one in which the powerful liberated themselves to pursue their ends at the expense of the powerless.⁹ Carney may have been correct; the one-world fantasy was over. But there is an alternative narrative. This rupture can equally be seen as a surfacing of an always latent form of interdependence. That form is extractive and hierarchical. It lurks in the Global Mind, waiting to be stimulated by a specter of rising risks and threats posed by strangers. It would be recognizable to imperialists of the 1890s and 1930s; it emerged from the shadows of globalization’s hypocrisies after 2008. The illusions of globalization may have been buried in that Alpine winter of 2026 as Carney’s speech ricocheted around the world. But the rewiring of interdependence to favor the empowered with a disregard that shaded into dehumanization of the powerless was not new.

The struggle to resolve the vexing questions about interdependence flows through the last two centuries like a great river. It has yielded major wars and exterminations as well as heroic commitments and solidarities. This is not because some people are bad and others good, some realistic and others naïve, some caring and others cruel. It is because *need* produces mixed sentiments from the same origin point; need elicits a basic tension within the imaginings of the Global Mind. If we can hold the image of diverging urges, competition and cooperation, solidarity and suspicion, in our heads at the same time it might be easier to talk in less either-or, stand-my-ground terms, to see that what binds also divides, to accept that needing others can be comforting and agonizing at the same time.

Little Finger

The trouble with interdependence was sown into early arguments about capitalism before its triumph. In earlier times, strangers appeared in markets and temples where they bought and sold goods and shared

prophecies from far away. Migrants settled among natives. Foreign merchants hawked spices and exotic cloths. Face-to-face interactions among strangers in the fairs of medieval Champagne and Samarkand yielded codes of behavior and exchange, subtle nods, handshakes, bows. Biblical Jerusalem was a cacophonous entrepôt of traders and money lenders who spoke many tongues yet were conversant in gestures that promoted trust across cultural and religious divides.¹⁰ The world economy began to change in the eighteenth century. Spreading empires, the seeds of free trade, capital mobility across borders, and mass migration laced a world of connected villages into an integrated, and increasingly interdependent, unit. But those complex codes of personalized trust and mutual regard among localized strangers had difficulty keeping up as trade and migration became more impersonal and larger scale.

Some observers saw new perils on the horizon. Capitalism meant that trade was growing, but the ties between strangers became more anonymous. Observers struggled to understand changes in ways that tangled the cold logic of self-interest with the heat of one's emotions and sympathies. Notably, eighteenth-century pioneers of political economy worried about what has been called the "dilemma of distance." It obsessed them. They saw how the rise of commercial society (the word "capitalism" still didn't exist) could generate bonds of sympathy between people; they also foresaw that as commerce reached into remote corners, it stretched these bonds between strangers and thinned them out.¹¹

Let's start with the bonding. The founder of modern economics, Adam Smith, argued that morals and markets worked together to create virtues, trust, politeness, and respect—elements that glued societies together so that commerce could take place without grabbing or feuding. In one of his most famous passages of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith argued that the division of labor appealed to self-interest *and* brought people into a common purpose. He noted famously that "it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own

necessities but of their advantages.” For Smith, humans didn’t have an innate regard and love for each other; their instinct for self-preservation and pursuit of advantage drove them to reciprocal association with others. It was not noblesse-oblige but necessity that brought people together into mutual regard and tethered them through specialization.

This is crucial: Smith was commenting not just on the needs *of* strangers but the need *for* strangers. It was, he believed, in the self-interest of people to depend on each other. In turn, the need for strangers would trigger regard for strangers’ needs. From this flowed a harmony of human forces that pushed societies forward and upward, always mixing economic reason and emotion. What he called the “mutual sympathy of sentiments” served as a bedrock of social relations; sympathy was the underlying fabric that softened self-interest’s potentially predatory impulses and restrained dangerous passions, like avarice, to make them more “social.”

Smith’s friend, David Hume, took the argument for interdependence a step further. It was, he argued, commercial nations that were “both the happiest and most virtuous.” In an essay he wrote in 1752, and which deeply influenced Smith, Hume explained that “industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished, and, what are commonly denominated, the more luxurious ages.” It was from trade among strangers and the spread of consumption that people learned the habit of “conversing together.” And of all trade, the most beneficial, he thought, was foreign trade. Here Hume advanced his case for interdependence to its limits. Foreign trade exposes peoples of the world to different goods, tastes, and desires. It “rouses men from their indolence; and presenting the gayer and more opulent part of the nation with objects of luxury, which they never before dreamed of, raises in them a desire of a more splendid way of life than what their ancestors enjoyed.”¹² By being exposed to luxuries, goods, and services beyond one’s reach, especially when they came from exotic places, people would become more civilized.

In the course of a prolonged exchange and friendship between Hume and Smith, the potential for harmony became more elaborate. With

mutual gain and splendor might also come justice. Hume extended this idea famously in a passage in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* in 1751. The spread of commerce might spread a concern for fairness. “Suppose that several distinct societies maintain a kind of intercourse for mutual convenience and advantage,” he told his readers. Then, “the boundaries of justice still grow larger, in proportion to the largeness of men’s views, and the force of their mutual connexions.” By contrast, in a world in which humans could pluck from the trees all they wanted there would be no need to trade. Music, the arts, and many virtues may flourish. But justice—the defense of others because it is the right thing to do because it is in one’s self-interest—would be totally “USELESS” (Hume’s caps), “an idle ceremonial, and could never possibly have place in the catalogue of virtues.”¹³

Since Hume and Smith’s time, this argument about the uplifting effects of integration, lacing human needs to human virtues through a helix of relations between strangers, has been a precept of a fundamentally optimistic view of progress, one that escalated from need to recognition, and from recognition to justice.

If they were optimistic, they also had worries. Smith and Hume could have stopped on an upbeat note. But they did not. There was a problem. Harmony was not a logical or necessary outcome of widening the radius of “mutual convenience and advantage.” Did the “largeness of men’s views” always follow in proportion to “mutual connexions”? Smith and Hume were not oblivious to intrinsic perils, intrinsic in the sense that risks were inherent to the need for strangers, especially as the encompassing radius of interdependent strangers grew. What happened when strangers became less visible to each other, when exchange relations became more and more anonymous, more remote—when “men’s views” lost focus? This is where it is important to reckon with the ways commerce also thinned the bonds of human-to-human relations even as it multiplied and extended them. Distance had been bothering Smith before he made the case for the virtues of self-interest in *The Wealth of Nations*. It was a wrinkle in his scheme from early in his thinking. Could a harmony of sentiment survive the effects of expanding distance; could one be separated and sympathetic at the same time?

To illuminate the problem, Smith engaged in a few thought experiments and added the calculus of pain to a mix of emotions otherwise dominated by the pursuit of pleasure. In his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), he speculated on the human capacity to sympathize with the suffering of those far away. He conceded that a human naturally “feels his own pleasures and his own pains more sensibly than those of other people.” These were what he called “the original sensations,” and they radiated outward to include close kin, then neighbors and friends. But greater happiness and beneficence required more than close ties; the challenge was to identify pleasures and pains of others beyond the tribe and regulate behavior accordingly. Smith’s solution was to introduce readers to a third character in the relations between strangers: the “impartial spectator,” who judged human behavior and deemed it worthy of trust. Our ability to imagine such a character, a kind of secular God, is what kept people from behaving in beastly and extractive ways because they internalized the perspective of others. Part 3 of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* began by acknowledging human limits: “We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them, unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us.” He added: “We can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them.”¹⁴ The operation required detachment, an ability to imagine being judged by others as a condition for living in a society greater than a clan bound by blood and soil.

How did the impartial spectator monitor behavior and sympathy when the strangers were far apart, mediated by continents, oceans, and many other layers of transactions? Smith performed another thought experiment. He asked readers to join him in wondering how “a man of humanity” might feel, upon reading the news, about the plight of many Chinese swallowed up by an earthquake? One might imagine this gentleman sipping his tea from Canton, sweetened with tea from slave plantations of the Caribbean. While doing so, Smith noted, this “man of humanity” would study the effects of the earthquake “upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general.”

He considered the effects on his self-interests. And then? What about the victimized? Smith answered, “And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity [*sic*], as if no such accident had happened.” In one of his memorable passages, Smith addressed the diminishing power of sympathy for those suffering far away:

If he [this imagined man of humanity] was to lose his little finger tomorrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them [the suffering Chinese], he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.¹⁵

Key words in this passage are *provided he never saw them*. That’s what distance did: made the fortunes of strangers invisible and difficult to see back home. Distance added to the burden of the impartial spectator. Remember this passage because it will be relevant when we consider the effects of technologies of communication, especially the role of media, which burst upon the stage just as free trade swept liberal thinking in the middle of the nineteenth century. For now, we need to unpack Adam Smith’s little finger problem. Does one lose sleep over the plight of endangered far-away strangers or the prospect of losing a little finger? Therein lay a disturbing thought. Adam Smith and David Hume worried that “beneficence” tended to fade as a stranger receded from the spectatorial center; it faded while dependency did not. The dynamic resembles, Hume noted in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (book 3, section 3, titled “Of Goodness and Benevolence”), “all objects [that] seem to diminish by their distance.” This was how a painful little finger might obsess someone more than the death of thousands of strangers far away even as the man of humanity sipped his Cantonese tea.¹⁶

Herein lay a dilemma for the prophets of capitalism, one which has haunted us ever since.¹⁷ Normally, Smith and others are read as apostles of free markets. What is often forgotten is that they fretted over the moral consequences of market life. While specialization and mutual

need created structural bonds of necessity that pressed the horizons of interdependence into the distance, the regard for strangers followed no such pressure. There was no physical law, no gravitational pull, drawing people to be more social with far-strangers, no automatic trigger to summon what Hume called “tender passions” to accompany the mutuality of cold self-interest. Tenderness sparred with other passions like courage, ambition, and greed, which were potentially destructive and could dispose one to be “a tyrant and public robber.” There were, in other words, dueling urges within commercial society and thus dueling collective emotions governing dependence between strangers. And there was little to predict whether tenderness or greed might prevail. The very same commercial society that fostered interdependence, motivated the appreciation of arts and luxuries, and bred good manners also pushed strangers apart; the bonds of sympathy did not automatically keep pace with the spread of self-interest.

How to resolve markets with morals, exchange without exploitation? Smith, Hume, and other prophets of capitalism had only unsettled, contingent, and speculative answers. Later, less hesitant thinkers in the flush of the industrial revolution of free trade would call the effort to reach a humane synthesis either credulous or impossible. But so long as the rewards from strangers were bountiful, there was hope that sympathy would keep pace with self-interest.

There were two noteworthy exceptions for the early prophets. The first was the example of the East India Company’s increasing powers in Bengal and monopoly rights to trade. This was a model of bullying strangers. It undermined the sovereign’s “natural” obligation to look out for the welfare of its subjects in order to govern virtuously. It was bound to spiral into cruelty and debase the otherwise potentially uplifting effects of trade. The East India Company, in Smith’s immortal words, exemplified “the wretched spirit of monopoly.”¹⁸ This concern is worth bearing in mind as observers monitored the allure of predation. The second was slavery, a thorn in the side of market optimists and discomfiting to Scots in particular, as it is now clear that the Scottish commercial economy was highly dependent on the slave trade and

circulation of tropical goods from plantations.¹⁹ One might even say that confronting the suffering of slaves made raw a nerve that connected the senses to the mind of the British empire. Here too the urge of institutions to further extraction illuminated the limits of sympathy—and the power of the temptation to dominate. Smith is spare in his commentary. *The Wealth of Nations* alludes to slavery as an expression of “the pride of man” and his urge to “domineer over others.”²⁰ But of the enslaved themselves scarcely a word; the suffering strangers was, in the end, less concerning than the distortion in the allocation of capital to monopoly interests. The hope was that expanding commercial society would make enslavement obsolete because it would erode monopoly. As the traffic in enslaved labor grew, its cruelty made it a cause célèbre.²¹

In their time, Smith, Hume, and others found the oppression of strangers to be cruel. But in their time, they were in fact more concerned with the feeling of *indifference* among the consumers of Bengali textiles or Caribbean sugar, that is, simply not caring about the fate of others, especially those upon whom we rely for the things we desire. Indeed, concern for the commonwealth rather than the privilege of monopolists would eventually render oppressions obsolete. Meanwhile, it was the specter of indifference that threatened to perpetuate injustice. What they feared was the lack of sympathy for outsiders upon whom people depended—an emptiness, passivity, absence of attachment.

At the cusp of a world market revolution, it was harder to envision more active negative sentiments about strangers produced by interdependence itself. It was only a speck on their horizon that market integration might induce people to act in cruel and exploitative ways *because* they had a self-interest in doing so and claimed a right to do so. Smith and Hume could not quite foresee how the need for strangers might yield active resentments, anxieties, and loathing that drove some strangers to degrade and to dehumanize others as conditions for inhumane integration. The passing of time would show that extraction and its emotional conditions would not wither away. Rather, they set off a debate over the moral conditions of interdependence, a debate over how to share the world.

The Picture Gallery

As capitalism marched across the globe, and technologies of interconnection proliferated, the debate over needing strangers became ferocious because interdependence became observable. The unity came into being just as a revolution in media and representation made strangers more visible to each other in print, on screens, and eventually on devices carried around in pockets.

The debates in our day over the ethical, strategic, and material bonds with strangers, fueled by circulating images, are not new even if they ricochet across the world with an instantaneity that no one could foresee when the first oceanic cables were laid and modern cameras were invented in the middle of the nineteenth century. The rise of modern interdependence coincided with a revolution in communications. Newspapers, televisions, cameras, and eventually, pocketable screens and lenses, as well as actors linked to the spread of modern communications, including journalists, business boosters, social activists, and “influencers”—witnesses of what was happening far away—made these ties visible in ways Adam Smith could not have imagined.²²

Valuable knowledge flowed across borders as commodities, migrants, and capital did. Indeed, the circulation of information enabled and motivated the flow of products and people in pursuit of opportunities. As a result, strangers lived far away but they were not unseen; global interdependence coiled with the emergence of a society of spectacles, one in which remote social relations were mediated by news, stories, and images. “We are speaking of the elements of the new commercial relationships,” noted the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, “the traffic in commodities and news created by early capitalist long-distance trade.” The old vertical relationships of dependence, associated with local life and feudal ways, got eclipsed by “a far-reaching network of horizontal economic dependencies.”²³

Few forces gave more immediacy and visibility to emerging dependencies than the movement of photographic images, which were part of a wider transformation in the economy of information flows. Remember Adam Smith’s words: *provided he never saw them*. If Smith

anticipated some of the effects of long-distance commerce but could not foresee the changing economy of images, one who did was the African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass. A former enslaved man from Maryland who would go on to world renown as a writer and orator, Douglass was also one of the most photographed men of the nineteenth century; and more than a subject, Douglass was an important protagonist as a magazine editor, publisher, and best-selling author in the burgeoning emotional economy of print capitalism. He had a sense of the power of the reproducible and mobile image in shaping public sentiment about strangers. The camera as we know it was barely a decade old when, on December 3, 1861, months into the U.S. Civil War, Douglass gave an impassioned lecture at Boston's Tremont Temple. It was right after a fierce winter storm. The hall was packed, despite the blizzard. Douglass rose to the stage. He praised great inventors, James Watt (steam), Benjamin Franklin (electricity), Samuel Morse (telegraphy). But, he complained, the inventors of "pictures" never got the recognition they deserved. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the French painter and printmaker who had figured out how to capture light etched onto silver-plated sheets of copper, arguably the first photos, had, according to Douglass, revolutionized the world. "By the simple but all-abounding sunlight," he "has converted the planet into a picture gallery," Douglass said. After his invention, "men of all conditions may see themselves as others see them." Figure 0.1 shows him in 1848 in one of his many portraits posing to defy customary images of Black men as bedraggled slaves, dressed as a gentleman, gazing thoughtfully away from the lens and therefore the viewer, inviting them to ponder what a former enslaved man was thinking.

Douglass was not naïve. He did not believe that strangers simply viewing other strangers would cause sympathy to abound. Photos, like all other commodities, could glut the market. "Next to bad manuscripts, pictures can be made the greatest bores," he joked. His audience laughed. "Authors, editors, and printers suffer by the former while almost everybody has suffered by the latter. They are pushed at you in every house you enter, and what is worse, you are required to give an opinion of them." More presciently, Douglass warned his audience to marvel at the breakthroughs but to be wary of their contradictory



FIGURE 0.1. Frederick Douglass.

effects. The circulation of pictures of others could magnify existing feelings, good and bad: “*All* [my emphasis] wishes, all aspirations, all hopes, all fears, all doubts, all determinations grow stronger and stronger precisely in proportion as they get themselves expressed in words, forms, colours, and actions.” In the end, however, Douglass captured the technological optimism of his age, the belief that breakthroughs that brought the world together would ultimately improve the world. The camera was a machine, like the cable, the railway, the steamship, and the spread of print technologies, destined to forge ever more togetherness. Consider some of Douglass’s closing words to his rapt audience: “The increased facilities of locomotion, the growing inter-communication of distant nations, the rapid transmission of intelligence over the globe—the

worldwide ramifications of commerce—bringing together the knowledge, the skill, and the mental power of the world, cannot but dispel prejudice, dissolve the granite barriers of arbitrary power, bring the world into peace and unity, and at last crown the world with just[ice], liberty, and brotherly kindness.”²⁴

Douglass’s response to Adam Smith’s little finger problem was a cautiously optimistic one; while there were reasons to pause and worry, the forces of progress were on the side of a more enlightened togetherness. The camera contributed to the mobility of information and changed how people saw the world, partly because envisioning became more accessible, making the planet into a gallery. But the camera also changed vision itself. Photographs contained the sense of immediacy, of being there, witnessing events without being present; by collapsing the distance between the viewer and the sufferer, the pain (or pleasures) of strangers created a spectacle of togetherness and heightened complex and contradictory affective responses.

One of the effects of the camera—and transformations in printing, broadcasting, and eventually digital communications—was to diffuse the production of images and information so that not only were there more sources, they were more distributed. Creating and sharing a documentary vision, spreading spectatorship, went beyond professionals, a process that began long before the advent of the smartphone. The camera turned its possessor into a chronicler; because it was relatively cheap, mobile, and easy to master, the urge to produce and circulate portraits of distant people and places multiplied the quantity of distant encounters. Family portraiture was decreasingly restricted to members of gentry posing in bucolic settings with their dogs resting at their ankles. Albums, wedding poses, graduations, recordings of the solemn and the celebratory in the form of the snapshot meant that photographic displays proliferated as the camera and printing got cheaper. There was also the travel shot, the postcard, the obligatory ornaments of voyaging and encounter, which themselves were becoming democratized and commodified; from their start, the travel business organized tours in order to stage the traveler to be imaged in the iconic spot—the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids in Egypt, Disneyland.

In 1965, a French sociologist called photography a “middle-brow” art form that mapped on to the swelling of a middle class in search of its own symbolic capital, its own aesthetic, in the quest for social distinction.²⁵ Though Pierre Bourdieu, an avid photographer, missed the ways in which the photograph crossed the brows from high to low, he nonetheless pointed to the ways in which the production and circulation of images included the handiwork of amateurs who did not live off the sale of their reporting but who brokered it for other ends to make an interdependent world an intervisible one. One only has to think of postcards in the twentieth century or images taken on smartphones from vacations in the twenty-first century to be posted on Instagram—or, for that matter, the way in which documentarists chronicled police brutality with iPhones during the plague-filled summer of 2020 in Minsk or Minnesota, or the explosion of videoclips of atrocities in Israel and Gaza. The advent of digital photography and social media marked one more stage in the explosion in supply of images that made strangers more commonplace yet ever more liquid.²⁶

Documentarists were part of a wider assembly of actors, institutions, and technologies that connected strangers and conjugated understandings of self-interest in and sympathy between them. They could bridge political and spiritual economies that tied people—and their faiths—together. Consider the story of Rev. William A. Smith, a mid-century evangelical missionary who left Canada for China in the early 1930s and whose service to his Lord connected rural folk of the Ottawa Valley to rural folk of Shandong. Born in Scotland before the First World War, he, like millions of others, voyaged to Canada to escape a poverty trap in Glasgow just as Italian farmers moved to Argentina, Ceylonese sharecroppers ventured to Guyana, and Gujarati printers sailed to the Cape Colony. While pounding the pavement in Depression-era Toronto, he met a preacher, converted to an evangelical brand of Protestantism, and found the vocation to preach himself. A few years later, he left Canada to become a missionary in China. En route, his vessel docked in Hong Kong. He clamored down the gangplank to find a camera store to buy a recently invented fast and portable image-making machine of his own: a Leica. Rev. Smith was my grandfather—and he never ceased to marvel

at this state-of-the-art German device. As a child listening to his stories, I would watch as he would hold his camera, caressing it like a cat. It would be indispensable for his mission; for the rest of his long, preaching life, there was always a camera within reach to document what he saw for others to see. By the time he reached Hong Kong, the Leica had launched its career as the device of choice to record world events and atrocities like the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and the bombing of Guernica, and my grandfather bicycled and snapped his way across northeast China—until invading Japanese troops drove his family (including my mother) to flee in 1937.

We will return to the fateful hinge years of the mid-1930s in due course in this book. What is important about middle-brow amateurs like Rev. Smith is that making interdependence visible was not just a professional enterprise; it took commonplace and personalized forms and served many purposes. The images he produced were bundled into slide shows and recycled in magazines and posters for parishioners in Canada as part of a spiritual campaign to enlist their prayers and to raise money for the proselytizing business. Rev. Smith's images were one way to stir Canadian sympathies and shake their savings to support a distant



FIGURE 0.2. Shandong, 1936.

mission to rescue the souls of strangers far away. The images yielded a picture gallery of China and its peoples for farmers in the Ottawa Valley. Indeed, for millions of believers around the world, the mission photo created a sense of connection long before proselytizers took to airwaves and social media. There were more secular forms, postcards, travel shots, honeymoon memorabilia, ancestral albums, and mantelpiece images of the distant, the everyday personal picture galleries of the world. The photo shown in Figure 0.2, taken around 1936 of an itinerant vendor who used a sail to propel his barrow across the flatlands of Shandong, was one of my grandfather's favorites. It profiled what he regarded as the stoic ingenuity of the people he was seeking to rescue; it figured in slide shows exhibited to cobelievers in Canada to stir their compassion—and modest financial contributions.

Like so many other missionaries and economists, adventurers and investors, poets and journalists, scientists and technocrats making a world of spectacles and concepts, Rev. Smith contributed to the ways in which strangers regarded each other across streets and oceans, so that every living room and field of a conflict zone merged into connected operating theatres of the global mind. Pros and amateurs were among the many involved in recording an integrating world—rendering it intervisible as it was becoming interdependent. A new stage emerged for debating the world as it was coming into being, a forum for rival narratives and contested arguments triggered by the need for strangers.

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