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Book Review by Patrick Brown

## *Déjà Vu Deconstructed*

History has the remarkable optical quality of increasing clarity with distance: the further away we are, the more patently logical history appears. But it's a brave man that attempts to put recent history into a logical framework, to interpret the apparently random events of our own lifetime as the natural symptoms of the ebb and flow of beliefs and forces, of nations and conflicts.

John Ralston Saul is one such brave man. In his new book, *The Collapse of Globalism* we can see a remarkable attempt to interpret the last thirty or so years of human history. It is an era, says Saul, which has been dominated by a view of human affairs taken almost exclusively through the 'prism of economics', and the pursuit of a belief that economic rightness will inevitably lead to the elimination of poverty throughout the world, along with fairness, democracy, social justice and happiness.

This economic moralism is defined broadly as neo-something (liberal or conservative); it is evidenced by globalism; and it defines nations and communities as unimportant compared to the manifestations of commerce. This he describes as the 'castration' of government; the nation as a prisoner of economic events.

Saul comes not to praise globalism, but to bury it. His book carefully traces the rise and fall of globalism, starting in the 1970s and ending today, or maybe yesterday. He gives us description, chronology, and analysis of the events, organizations, and mechanisms which have shaped the lives of many of us. His hindsight may not be perfect, but we will recognise the headlines of the last thirty years, and how they fit into the context that he defines.

### **Already Dead**

Saul's most important message is that globalism is already deceased, the final death-blow having been delivered by recent, definitely unilateral, military and economic actions of the United States. This book is globalism's obituary.

Twenty five years, he says, is the usual historical lifetime of any economic movement, so the rapid rise and fall of this one does not surprise. As a labourer in the trenches of consulting for many of those years, however, I find it a painfully long time. During that time, many things appeared to me to be wrong, unjust, dysfunctional, or illogical, but I saw them either as the

results of mysterious forces to which I was not privy, or of sheer stupidity (which I witnessed often enough to believe that it was a real factor in the life of the world).

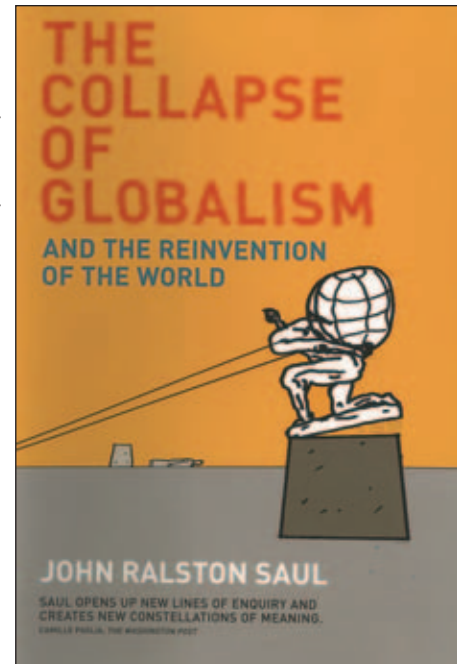
Saul's overall view presents the inexplicable not as a worldwide conspiracy, but as a belief system that served its acolytes well, and actively discouraged dissent. Indeed, when, towards the end of the book, he identifies the breakdown of globalism with a situation where economists actually disagree, the reader feels relief, as if witnessing the enlightenment.

He describes globalism as 'an experimental economic theory presented as Darwinian fact'—surely as deadly a putdown as one could imagine. He dwells a lot upon the presentation of the theory as inevitable, as a sort of religion. Although he traces the beginning of the end of globalism to about 1995, one can hear even today both businessmen and politicians speaking of this inevitability as still true and unquestioned, as received wisdom. Saul's book gives us many reasons to be wary of this: the power structure, he says, has not yet changed.

He is no more kind to the measurement of human progress in terms of gross economic statistics, which he characterizes kindly as 'uncertain,' while pointing out that these quantitative measures—of trade, productivity, poverty, etc—fail to provide any insight into the quality of life, and fail to measure any human activity which does not result in money changing hands.

### **Mechanisms of Globalism**

Saul's exposition of the mechanisms of globalism is wide-ranging and consistently critical. Technology, he says, is



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erroneously presented as a driver of events, with its own inevitability. The system demonstrates an inherent preference for the large over the small, which leads to commercial oligarchies and a limitation of the very competition which, in theory, both informs and drives economic growth. Mergers and acquisitions, he says, reduce competition and societal wealth. He has few polite words for technocratic management and management schools, the World Trade Organization, the MAI (Multilateral Agreement on Investment—remember it?), currency speculation, international intellectual property laws, airline deregulation, industrial agriculture, the moral imperative of annually balanced government budgets, and the application of private sector approaches to public sector functions.

But the real reason for the collapse of globalism, he says, is that it doesn't work. 'Doesn't work for whom?' you ask. The answer, it appears, is for most people. Yes, the world's Gross Product, as measured by the banks and the statisticians, has risen over the years. Yes, multinational corporations have grown and multiplied. But the poor are still with us; and despite the fact that families in the industrialized countries generally have two breadwinners rather than one, they are generally no richer than they were in the sixties.

In most countries, he notes an increased gap between the rich and the poor. And in the poorer countries, particularly in Africa, the standard of living has dropped markedly.

### **The Future**

Historians that describe events of hundreds or even thousands

of years ago are mercifully spared the responsibility of applying the lessons they have learned to the future. Saul cannot escape this, and has given it a great deal of thought.

He notes that New Zealand, the poster child for neo-conservative economics, has abandoned the theory and is gradually unwinding the damage done; and Malaysia, the first country to bolt the neo-conservative consensus, has succeeded despite bucking the accepted trend; the annual meetings at Davos, Switzerland, where the acolytes gathered to exchange vows, no longer hold sway; and that economists now feel free to disagree with each other. And, most important, the United States now acts unilaterally, including its prosecution of the current Iraq war, and the 2004 devaluation of its currency.

Saul cites India and China as two nations that have pursued specifically nationalist economic policies, and are succeeding. He does not predict the end of global trade, but he does foresee re-regulation of financial markets and new nationalist economic initiatives. Not all nationalism is good, however; 'negative nationalism,' which he associates with 'false populism' is characterized by fear, anger, guilt, polarization, and extremism.

But what he terms 'positive nationalism' is confident, open, and focused on the public good. That's where he both hopes and predicts we are going.

*The Collapse of Globalism: And the Reinvention of the World.*  
John Ralston Saul; Toronto; Viking Canada, 2005. 309pp.  
\$36. ☞