Humanity as your enemy -- or is it "the economy, stupid"?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
28 November 2007

- On the appropriateness of liberalism's attempts to reform the system

- On Mark Shapiro's Exposed: The Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Products and What's at Stake for American Power

Culture Change Letter #172 - Nov. 29, 2007

We look around to see arguably lethal behavior by the average person. Most people drive cars unnecessarily, consume foods from great distance, and engage in other activities that serve to enrich powerful corporations that are a menace to the planet. We still do not see much attempt to restructure lifestyles ecologically and thus challenge the socioeconomic system. At this critical time in history can we argue that modern people are generally stupid? That they are your enemy? And that you may be your enemy too?

Or, do we just blame the Bad Guys? At Culture Change we prefer to lambaste the system and the dominant culture. No matter what your slant, you'd probably agree that one of the most reprehensible crimes by bad guys in corporations and government is the chemicals in plastics and other products being unleashed into our gene pool and despoiling the oceans. The system allows and defends it. These toxic substances add to insanity and other illnesses bearing down on members of modern society, especially here. And the U.S. as a whole is way behind the European Union. California is the U.S. exception, a state that has banned or regulated known carcinogens. This essay will address this disparity and explore our goals and prospects for reform or system replacement.

If you are aware of the challenges/catastrophes bearing down on us, and if you have actually started to take action, you are part of a ridiculously small minority and are not part of the casual ecocide. Yet you likely find it easier to accept other people’s actions rather than confront them, even when our lives depend on engaging others. You want to avoid the blame game. You want to try to be patient.

So, resigned to tiny progress at best, you move on to try various approaches. You reluctantly coddle the planet-killers in your midst, and give them an occasional verbal nudge. And at times you may try to convince those who continue to believe in the system that there is much, much more to be done than to try to clean up the political scene. Maybe you remember that in 1972, when asked about the good that could come from replacing Richard Nixon, Ralph Nader said, "Like placing a rose on a trash heap."

Witness the last 35 years: all we see are additions to the worsening trash heap. Liberals decried it then, but didn't reform the system, let alone replace it. They still pose the false choice to clean up the system or do nothing (sometimes defined as voting for a third-party candidate). Many "radicals" similarly see only those choices. Let’s face it: the consumer economy has got to go. Only when we stop buying corporate products will we start to starve and destroy the corporations that buy government policy. The consumer economy will go anyway. It depends on growth that's impossible to continue much longer. Not only are resource limits bearing down on the expanding overpopulation, but the financial system is dangerously ill and unbalanced.

It is essential to act instead of wait for collapse. We need to practice living without the system and Big Brother. We need to act as if our future is upon us -- the cooperative, sustainable and nature-respecting future. That future is the answer to many of today's vexing challenges. When we lull ourselves into complacency, when we imagine there is a better world awaiting us, for example, if we raise environmental standards globally, as the EU and California are trying to do, we ignore too much reality. Even a doubly strong Kyoto-like global treaty will be rendered meaningless if growth and industry persist as expected.

Prior to widespread acknowledgment and fear of global warming, we knew about the toxic effect of many environmental pollutants, those deadly chemicals approved only for corporate profit. We knew for well over three decades. So today, it's a little pathetic to have regulatory reform be an end in itself; bans of plastics and their additives are not enough.

We mislead ourselves when we feel thankful as another study comes out demonstrating the genetic reaction to endocrine-disrupting estrogenic chemicals. When we celebrate that tiny step, we put faith in mere reformism. This is not wise. Sometimes, those who appear to want to clean up the mess really want, perhaps unwittingly, to prop up the status quo, to protect the "rights" of corporations to roll on -- right over us. Deluded liberals want to believe that democracy is basically intact, that it can be improved, or that "we have lost our democracy," as if we really had it before the Bush era.

On Nov. 28 I attended author Mark Shapiro's talk in Berkeley, which was enhanced by the moderator Michael Pollan, author of The Omnivore's Dilemma. Shapiro's new book, Exposed: The Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Products and

What's at Stake for American Power, landed him on NPR the day before. On the NPR "Fresh Air" program he alerted the audience to the presence of lead in lipstick and chemicals in other products that cause cancer and a host of deadly illnesses.

Shapiro intones that global reform on chemicals means tough times for "American power" when we lag behind in regulations that can foster "innovation." This part of Shapiro's message is emphasized almost as much as his warnings about the chemicals. When toxics from China, for example, end up in the U.S. market rather than the EU, it is simply because the U.S. allows them without compelling business reasons, Shapiro says. His environmental-health message seems joined at the hip with corporate health. But is maintaining respect for Big Business all too fashionable for reporters and paid activists in this day and age, from what we should have learned? The result is that refreshing revelations on corporate policy and government complicity limit the field of vision at a time of system failure and ecocide. An underlying message of Shapiro's is that dirty politics and tainted products are artifacts of mistaken policies and can be fixed without a revolution or petrocollapse.

As commendable as it is for Shapiro to uncover the workings of American corporate government, and as necessary as it is to learn about toxic and estrogen-imitating chemicals coming into our bodies -- on average 148 such substances in the average U.S. citizen -- I found it unfortunate that Shapiro seems to serve as a good angel for the corporate economy and government agencies (beset by bad angels). If the public acted upon what Shapiro essentially argues, without a bigger picture informing us of the deeper problems, we will only perpetuate the end of Nature's health and therefore perhaps the human species. We would be like sheep led to the slaughter.

There is a choice. The opportunities to hobble and end the dominant system are here today, and pursued by a few of us. It's hard for many to get involved and participate in these peaceful opportunities, when they are unpopular and suppressed. Too bad that, thanks to Wall Street funding and misguided cultural memes telling us to keep up this alleged "progress" flowing from technology, the environmental movement is rigged. The hour is so late that what might have been solutions are now barely even options.

Shapiro gave no evidence that he grasps that world trade, powered by currently affordable petroleum, is completely unsustainable, and that there is no scalable fuel-substitute on the horizon. He did not mention that petroleum and petrochemicals are the major source of chemical threats, and therefore ought to be targeted and eliminated as a group to truly green our lifestyle and aid our climate in crisis. With his knowledge, Shapiro could become a major spokesperson against the plastic plague. But he would have to come to believe, as some of us do, that all plastic is filth in terms of ecology.

It is unrealistic to hope Shapiro will understand -- let alone admit publicly -- that the socioeconomic system is not possible to reform adequately, or that it does not deserve to endure. Alarmingly, his premise regarding American power, and about a truly fair global market, actually seems to support growth. Equally scary, his message could serve to legitimize corporate rule, even though he may not really want that, if his favored reforms got faster traction.

To his credit, Shapiro's measured and responsible way of presenting facts, makes his message a useful, hard-working exponent in the movement to ban plastics and many chemicals. May his book inform many people at risk. Indeed in that way he may do more to help the world than Culture Change. But the world he envisions is not to be, or to remain. The world beyond corporate dominance and technology-run-amok is our only viable future

Conclusion

While in recent decades humans have acted especially stupidly and meekly, I have compassion. There are formidable obstacles that exist when we try to seize our fate from doom. Still we can focus on liberation in whatever individual spheres we can bring it to bear, as we spread the word and undermine the "Death Star." As we do so, and as we get a handle on the multitude of mostly untested poisonous chemicals sold for our convenience, we learn fluency in sustainable-living principles. When collapse hits, we will see the end of "The Market" or "The Economy" as a substitute for essential and convivial human relations.

Do not get sucked into the many-headed beast's apparent need for our earnest attention. Journalists and other crusading writers and activists sail right into (or near) the rising tempests of controversy and sorrow, surfacing to constantly point at the evil-doers ruining our otherwise peaceful time on Earth. We can assume that the system will always add more distractions and crises that appear to need reform. It is imperative we look past the scandal du jour and even past the frequent reminders of the need to eliminate campaign-finance influence. While the EU may be a better systemic model, they too will crash and wither when they forever lose their massive petroleum allocation, and when climate change ravages their continent. The new world of survival that beckons does not feature a cleaned-up, ethical consumerism. The new world of survival has a narrow window through which you may capture a glimpse and slip on through.

*****

Further Reading:

"Is the market The Enemy?" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #16: April 16, 2003:

culturechange.org

"Rejecting the toxic plague: War on plastic" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #82:

culturechange.org

"Plastics are on the run in San Francisco, the nation’s anti-petroleum capital" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter # 156

culturechange.org

"Our Synthetic Sea" DVD available from Algalita Marine Research Foundation:

algalita.org

"Mark Shapiro in Conversation with Michael Pollan" - announcement and book review blurbs:

globalexchange.org

Exposed: The Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Products and What's at Stake for American Power, by Mark Shapiro:

chelseagreen.com

MIchael Pollan, author of The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals:

michaelpollan.com

The fat cats keep at it: toxic-chemical polluters keep their rights!
"States Sue Over Eased EPA Disclosure Rule" - by Marla Cone, Los Angeles Times

truthout.org

"Environmental Magna Carta Under Siege" - by Janet Pelley
Environmental Science and Technology Online:

truthout.org

* * * * *

Editorial assistance was provided by Sally Erickson, producer of the documentary
What a Way to Go - Life at The End of Empire