Now we are human commodities

Contributed by Chris Maser
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Editor’s note: Chris Maser’s observations and insights are as sharp as a laser. He truly sees the big picture through the millennia of human experience. Such as: "…people themselves are increasingly seen as economic commodities. How can a commodity find security from another commodity? In this sense, the marketplace satisfies only temporarily our collective neuroses, while hiding the values that give true meaning to human life." This article is Part Two in Maser’s series for Culture Change. This one starts out with a run-down of the origin of the corporation and its rise to dominant power today; this section is vital for those uninformed about corporate personhood. – Jan Lundberg

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The corporation, it turns out, is an invention of the British Crown through the creation of the East India Company by Queen Elizabeth I in 1600, which, being the original, transnational corporation, set today’s precedence for big businesses. The East India Company, "found India rich and left it poor," says author Nick Robin. The corporate structure of the East India Company was deemed necessary to allow the British to exploit their colonies in such a way that the owner of the enterprise was, for the first time, separated from responsibility for how the enterprise behaved.

This conscious separation of personal responsibility from the act of looting is not surprising because "looting" is, theoretically as least, considered immoral in Christian circles. The corporation is thus a "legal fiction," that lets the investors who own the business avoid personal responsibility whenever the business dealings are unethical or even blatantly illegal, despite the fact that such unscrupulous behavior profits them enormously.
A corporation, after all, has but one purpose—to make money for the owners. Economist Milton Friedman gave voice to this pinhole vision when he answered his own rhetorical question: "So the question is, do corporate executives, provided they stay within the law, have responsibilities in their business activities other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible? And my answer to that is, no they do not." In fact, the "corporate system," say analysts, "has no room for beneficence toward employees, communities, or the environment," a notion endlessly demonstrated on a daily global scale.

Founders of the United States, such as Thomas Jefferson, recognized the dangers of corporate greed, which accounts for why the founding fathers believed corporate charters should be granted only to those entities willing to serve the greater public interest. Throughout most of the 19th century, therefore, states typically restricted a corporation they chartered to the ownership of one kind of business and strictly limited the amount of capital it could amass. In addition, states required stockholders to be local residents, detailed specific benefits that were due the community, and placed a 20- to 50-year limit on the life of a corporation’s charter. Legislatures would withdraw a corporation’s charter if it strayed from its stated mission or acted in an irresponsible manner.

Although the power of modern corporations dates back to this era, it has been greatly augmented by two major legal dodges aimed at giving them unencumbered authority to serve only the self-interest of a few people. This was accomplished first by the piecemeal removal of those restrictions imposed to protect the welfare of the public from the self-serving interests of the few.

The second change came in 1886, when the U.S. Supreme Court made the corporation all but invulnerable by decreeing, in a case brought by the Southern Pacific Railroad against Santa Clara County, California, that a corporation has the right of "personhood" under the 14th Amendment (originally intended to protect the rights of freed slaves) and, as such, enjoys the same constitutional protections that you or I do as individuals. This second change was reaffirmed in 1906, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that, "The Corporation is a creature of the state. It is presumed to be incorporated for the benefit of the public." Within a century, the corporation had been transfigured into a "superhuman creature of the law," that is legally superior to any American citizen because the corporation has civil rights without civil responsibilities.1

When People become Commodities

We, as a society, are losing sight of one another as human beings—witness the Wall-Street money chase in which numerous, large corporations discount human value as they increasingly convert people into faceless commodities that are bought and sold on a whim to improve the corporate standing in the competitive marketplace. After all, market share translates into political power, which translates into higher profit margins, both of which exacerbate the corporate disregard for people, the rampant destruction of Nature, and the squandering of natural resources.

There was a time when people were valued for what they were as individuals. Although American workers have long had an enforced workweek of 40 hours, there currently is an insidious infringement into personal life due to pagers and cell phones, which allow corporations to "own" employees 24 hours a day. Businesses seem to have no moral compunctions about calling employees whenever they choose—"for the good of the company." For those who would choose to live by the corporate proverb, "for the good of the company," the Families and Work Institute said that in 2001 employees are more likely to:

• lose sleep

• have physical and emotional health problems

• make mistakes on the job

• feel and express anger at employers

• resent co-workers who they perceive are not pulling their weight

• look for different jobs

In the workplace, these feelings translate into more injuries and thus more claims for workers' compensation, increased absenteeism, higher health insurance and health-care costs, impaired job performance, and greater employee turnover—all of which are counterproductive and costly not only for employees but also for employers.2

At home, these feelings are often converted into a sense of not enough time to care for once-loved pets. About four million pets were brought each year to 1,000 shelters surveyed during 1994, 1995, and 1996, the vast majority of which were dogs. Of those, about 64 percent were killed. Only 24 percent were adopted; others were primarily lost pets that were ultimately reunited with their families. Most of the owners who gave up pets were under 30 years of age. When asked why they were giving up their pet, many said that the hours they were being required to work disallow time to adequately care for their animal.3

Moreover, if American workers want more time with and for their families, the corporate response is: "If you aren't willing to do the job the way we want, we'll find someone who will." This attitude raises the question of what comes first today in our land of opportunity, where supposedly one is free to seek liberty and the pursuit of happiness—love or money? This question seems all the more relevant in light of the Enron debacle.

The collapse of Enron highlights how some corporations are using people simply as commodities to boost company earnings. While Enron's employees were both forced to purchase and simultaneously prohibited from selling company stock in their Enron-heavy 401(k) retirement accounts, Enron executives cashed out more than $1 billion in stocks when it was near its peak in value. Regular employees, however, had to watch helplessly as their Enron stock plummeted in value and their life savings disappeared.4

Clearly, the punishing free-for-all of globalization and open markets has not invited love into its house and thus is as much about the fear of lost opportunity as it is about maximizing profit. And now, as fear enters into the monetary counting houses, one must realize that any rosy face painted on the economy is done so with far too many temporary and dead-end jobs in the service sector.

The growing use of long-term, temporary workers by American businesses has created a new kind of employment discrimination, but not across the board because some people actively choose such an arrangement. Employers typically hire contingent workers, such as independent contractors and temporary workers, to fill gaps in personnel, especially to meet high seasonal demands in business. Because, technically, they are not "company employees," long-term, temporary employees or "permatemps" can work at a job for years without being entitled to paid vacations, health insurance, pensions, and other benefits (such as rights and protections under federal labor statutes) enjoyed by permanent employees who do the same work.5 Although not all corporations operate this way, the arrangement is, nevertheless, desirable from the employer's point of view because it holds down the cost of labor, which means higher profits.

The result is millions of employed people in the United States who cannot afford the basic necessities of food, housing, clothing, and medical care. This problem is well depicted in the movie "Hidden in America," which shows that below the image of shining prosperity is a hidden layer of poverty with its desperate but proud parents and hungry children.

There is also a kind of sweatshop alive and well in the United States—faster and faster with no time to slow down. A Gallup Poll in the summer or 1999 found that 44 percent of working Americans referred to themselves as "workaholics." Yet, 77 percent said they enjoyed their time away from work more than they did their time while working. In fact, our American quest for material wealth—the money chase—leads to profound unhappiness, emotional isolation, and higher divorce rates because we are so busy striving for income there is no time for normal, human relationships.6

Our American ration of irony, however, is that the more connected we become electronically, the more detached and isolated we become emotionally because we are losing the human elements of life: the sight of a human face, the sound of a human voice, a smile, a handshake, a touch on the shoulder, a kind word. In essence, we’re losing the human dimension of scale in terms of time, space, touch, sound, and size; we are physically and emotionally losing one another and ourselves. Nothing makes this clearer than such things as home fax machines, laptop computers, cell phones, beepers, Palms, BlackBerrys, and iPods.

People are now "on-line" at home; in transit to work; at work; in transit to home via cars, planes, trains, and on foot. In other words, people are virtually tethered to work. Such workaholism is not only expected by employers, it’s often demanded if one wants to keep their job, which has added "24/7" to our lexicon.

This kind of workaholism is especially hard on women because they are increasingly expected to work outside the home, juggle childcare, school activities for their children, and also maintain the home as though they had to nothing else to do. In addition, the 24/7 phenomenon hit the American work scene shortly after woman became a major part of the workforce.

As things pile endlessly upon one another, the whole of life seems to melt down into a gigantic obligation that becomes increasingly difficult to meet because there simply is not enough time to get everything done, let alone done well. A standard greeting today is: "I’m so busy."

This greeting is worn like the "red badge of courage" was in the past, as though our exhaustion is proof of our worth and our ability to withstand stress, which, in turn, is a mark of our maturity. In fact, we seem to measure our importance by how busy we are. The busier we are, the more important we feel to ourselves and, we imagine, to others, which is reminiscent of the underlying theme of the British television program "Keeping up Appearances."

If we do not rest, however, we will lose our way because action without time for reflection is seldom wise. Rest nourishes our minds, bodies, and souls, which are poisoned by the hypnotic trance of perpetual motion as accomplishment and social "success." Therefore, we never truly rest, especially many who are self-employed.

In the quarter century following World War II, giant corporations like Ma Bell, General Motors, General Electric, and Westinghouse were the place to be, representing, as they did, the pinnacle of what capitalism had to offer workers: extraordinary job security and a cornucopia of benefits. In fact, college graduates tripped over one another seeking life-time careers with these bedrock corporations because they could expect a comfortable house, a generously financed retirement package, lifelong health insurance, and, more often than not, a 9 to 5 job that allowed an organized man to form a healthy balance between work and family.

That was the era when job security formed the underpinnings of the corporate operating principle. In 1962, Earl S. Willis, manager of employee benefits at General Electric, wrote, "Maximizing employee security is a prime company goal." Later, he wrote, "The employee who can plan his economic future with reasonable certainty is an employer’s most productive asset." In recent times, however, General Electric’s John F. Welch, Jr., was known as "Neutron Jack" for shedding 100,000 jobs at the company.

Job security has vanished at numerous companies. Today, chief executives dump thousands of workers in the blink of an eye, hoping such moves will please securities analysts and thus investors, so their stocks will inch up 5 percent on the stock exchange. In addition, corporate managers slash away at employee benefits as though employees have suddenly ceased to be humans and have become commodities that can be forced into a more efficient mode of production with less cost to the corporation. They also phase out "defined benefit" retirement plans in favor of the far-less expensive 401(K) "do it yourself plans."

Many employees of the post World War II era, until the latter part of the 1960s, were true believers in their companies. They were also exemplary employees who worked 12 and 14 hours days, six and even seven days a week, whatever it took to ensure their company’s success. They did this enthusiastically because their company’s success was the foundation of their job security, and hence their success as family providers.

Then things changed. The corporate mind-set closed and corporate attitudes hardened. Now, despite their dedication, despite all the birthdays, bedtimes, and school events they have missed as their children grew up, many have been chopped from their company’s payroll in a "merger," "re-engineering," "rightsizing," "downsizing," and "re-deployment." Bitter at the callous way they have been treated, many workers regret having been so dedicated, only to be treated like commodities that are discarded at will.7

"In a personal sense, it hurts, but in a macro sense, it is the action we’ve got to take to remain competitive," says Joel Naroff of Naroff Economic Advisors in Holland, Pennsylvania. "Ultimately the adjustments that the economy is making is going to set us up for the next strong period of growth." What Naroff seems to be saying between the lines is: While it hurts to be fired, it’s not personal; it’s business.

Others contend, however, that companies may well harm themselves by firing the people who purchase their products, potentially damaging the economy in ways that cannot be rectified with quick fixes, such as tax cuts or lowering the interest rate. In other words, layoffs (especially large, continuous ones) can only hurt the economy.

An economist, on the other hand, would counter with the notion that what really matters is how consumers view the situation. Some would even suggest that workers have become relatively used to being fired for the market convenience of their employer, as though that makes it "acceptable," even "okay." One could also rationalize that many of the job cuts will be less painful than they sound, in part because companies in a tight labor market have scores of unfilled jobs that are easy to eliminate. And then there is the argument that many other cuts would be spread over years, and some might not even occur.8

While this all sounds very "rational," workers and consumers act on emotions, not what passes for economic "logic," and announced layoffs can lead them to panic, because uncertainty and fear of the unknown are powerful allies when it comes to irrational thinking and the often-unwise actions it spawns. Thus, even if nothing in a person's own job changes, the fact that their company has fired people to increase the economic bottom line can, and often does, drastically change an employee's attitude about the wisdom of loyalty to the company and thus cripples the company's real wealth—the allegiance and imagination of its employees.

No wonder it 's called "downsizing." The end result is that a worker's dignity levels out near zero! And what does the corporation lose when employees are fired—especially older, long-term employees? The corporation loses its collective memory and its history, both accrued through years of loyal service.

All of this revolves around consumption and consumerism. Consumption to the economist is the "end-all and be-all" of production. It means economic growth. Consumption is the heart and soul of capitalism itself. The rate of consumption by a populace is also the standard economic measure of human welfare.

Consumption as an end it itself arose with the conceptualization of "the economy" as a macro-social entity and "economics" as a macro-social science—rather than as household management, which is the true meaning of the word economy. To this end, Adam Smith wrote: "Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production."

Because consumption and consumerism dominate social discourse and political agendas of all parties, consumerism hogs the limelight at center stage as the prime objective of Western industrialized societies, which, in the collective, are known as "consumer societies." Within these consumer societies, the purpose of consumption is: variety, distraction from daily stresses, pleasure, power, and the status that one hopes will bring with them a measure of happiness and social security. None of this comes to pass, however, because people themselves are increasingly seen as economic commodities. How can a commodity find security from another commodity? In this sense, the marketplace satisfies only temporarily our collective neuroses, while hiding the values that give true meaning to human life.9

Author James B. Twitchell puts it nicely: "Once we are fed and sheltered, our needs are and have always been cultural, not natural. Until there is some other system to codify and satisfy those needs and yearnings, commercialism [consumerism]—and the culture it carries with it—will continue not just to thrive but to triumph."10

In the final analysis, it is doubtful many people really subscribe to the economist's notion that human happiness and contentment derives solely from, or even primarily from, the consumption of goods and services. It's therefore surprising that such a notion has come to hold nearly dictatorial power over public policy and the way industrialized societies are governed.

We are today so ensnared in the process of selling and buying things in the market place, that we cannot imagine human life being otherwise. Even our notion of well-being and of despair are wedded to the flow and ebb of the markets. Why is this so much a part of our lives? It is largely because people have yet to understand the notion of conscious simplicity, which is based on the realization that there are two ways to wealth: want less or work more. Put differently, true wealth lies in the scarcity of one's wants—as opposed to the abundance of one's possessions.

Endnotes

1. The discussion of corporate beginnings is based on: (1) Jim Hightower. 1998. Chomp! Utne Reader. March-April: 57-61, 104, (2) Nick Robins. 2001. Loot. Resurgence 210:12-16, and (3) David C. Korten. 2001. What to Do When Corporations Rule the World. Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures. Summer:48-51.

2. Diane Stafford. 2001. Workers feeling overwhelmed. Knight Ridder Newspapers. In: Corvallis Gazette-Times, Corvallis, OR. May 21.

3. Dru Sefton. 1998. Busy owners are abandoning pets. Knight-Ridder Tribune News Service. In: Corvallis Gazette-Times, Corvallis, OR. June 7.

4. The Associated Press. 2001. Enron retirees: Collapse wiped out life savings. Corvallis Gazette-Times, Corvallis, OR. December 19.

5. Tony Pugh. 1999. Sad Ballad of the Long-Term Temp. Knight Ridder Newspapers. In: Corvallis Gazette-Times, Corvallis, OR. December 7.

6. The Editors. 2000. No time to slow down. U.S. News & World Report. June 26:14.

7. The preceding four paragraphs are based on: Steven Greenhouse. 2001. After the Downsizing, a Downward Spiral. The New York Times. April 8.

8. The preceding three paragraphs are based on: Adam Geller. 2001. Economists fear cuts will affect consumer spending. The Associated Press. In: Corvallis Gazette-Times, Corvallis, OR. February 1.

9. The preceding three paragraphs are based on: Paul Ekins. 1998. From Consumption to Satisfaction. Resurgence 191:16-19.

10. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt. 2001. Sales Pitches That Put the M (for Mega) in Madison Ave. The New York Times. January 3

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This essay is condensed from Chris Maser's 2004 book The Perpetual Consequences of Fear and Violence: Rethinking the Future. Maisonneuve Press, Washington, D.C. 373 pp.

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Further Reading:

"The corporado's life and its antithesis" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change e-Letter #43, Nov. 19, 2003:

The image of the corporado — executive, investor, bandito of business, marauder against the public trust — obscures the interesting life of a consumer generally at rest in a social bubble. From what I observed up close, for many a corporado the relations with family and friends are so shallow that the terms "family" and "friends" are too generous. But a so-called master of the universe grins and bears it. To read the rest, go to

culturechange.org/e-letter-corporado.html