

# The New Feudalism

by Richard Evanoff

In *Powershift*, the final installment of Alvin Toffler's trilogy which includes *Future Shock* and *The Third Wave*, there are solemn warnings about contemporary "yearnings for a new dark age." Toffler believes that there are at least three potential threats to the high-tech information society he extols in *Powershift*: fanatical religion, "eco-theocracy," and revived xenophobia. Toffler labels these tendencies "eco-medievalist." But the alternative he envisions is, in essence, a world in which rational knowledge annihilates religious "superstition" and ushers in an age of endless technological innovation; in which large transnational corporations can effectively disguise the real power they wield in the world with "decentralized" management policies; and in which supranational political units displace local communities as the locus for a bland consumer culture that masks boring uniformity with superficial "variety."

My first encounter with the concept of "the new feudalism" wasn't in *Powershift*, but in Charles Leadbeater's and John Lloyd's *In Search of Work*, published three years earlier. Leadbeater and Lloyd drew some interesting parallels between our modern economy and medieval feudalism, suggesting in effect that the major transnational corporations are becoming the new feudal lords of our post-industrial society and that the rest of us are becoming post-industrial peasants. Wealth is concentrated into the hands of the few (something like 1 percent of the population owns more than 50 percent of the wealth in the United States). The big corporations are controlled by absentee landlords who reap enormous profits from their ownership of corporate stock. While these feudal lords contribute absolutely nothing to the economy in terms of human labor, the rest of us are forced to slave away for ever-diminishing wages that are increasingly unable to provide us with even the basic necessities of life (a significant percentage of the homeless in the United States are actually employed at low-wage jobs). Local communities are devastated whenever the powerful kings in faraway cities who control the transnationals decide to close down factories and move shop overseas. National governments have absolutely no control over the transnationals, which by etymology are not geographically (or legally) restricted to any one country. Modern nation-states are not the equivalent of feudal kings, but of feudal knights who are paid to keep the masses in line, preserve the "world order," and protect the interests of their capitalist masters.

Undoubtedly we are already in danger of entering a new feudal age, but who is respon-

sible? Toffler places the blame first of all on religion. Religious fanaticism can indeed be oppressive, but Toffler more sweepingly argues that what Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and New Age religions all have in common is a "hostility to secularism." He ominously writes, "What is happening is a sky-darkening attack on the idea of the Enlightenment which helped usher in the industrial age." My own reaction is, well, isn't it about time that something came along to challenge the egocentric humanism and blind faith in science and progress that is our inheritance from the Enlightenment? We need to rediscover our spiritual roots (even if it means weeding out the various superstitions that have grown

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up in the same soil). Enlightenment values themselves are responsible for pushing us towards the new feudalism: the mechanistic materialism that reduces nature to a machine, the distorted sense of liberty that permits the few to exploit the many, and a blind individualism that replaces Emersonian "self-reliance" with egoistic greed.

What about Toffler's "eco-theocrats"? Toffler trashes Ivan Illich for his concept of "sustainability without development," believing that the idea forces us to accept "poverty" as the essential human condition. Toffler's mistake is that he condescendingly equates poverty with the absence of First-World consumer goods. Ecologically sustainable communities in the Third World are certainly not "poor," as Toffler seems to imply. They typically function quite well until disrupted by pressures to enter the global economic market. The real poverty doesn't begin until indigenous people are persuaded to give up their sustainable native cultures and natural resources for the unfulfilled promise of capitalist consumerism. People who once lived in ecologically harmonious communities suddenly find themselves in crime-ridden, alco-

hol-drenched shanty towns. Poverty and development go hand in hand, just as Illich's concepts of sustainability and nondevelopment go hand in hand. What the First World smugly regards as "poverty" may in fact be the very kind of sustainable future we need to be moving towards. In fact, the only alternative to a sustainable world order is the very feudalism Toffler fears — a world in which a capitalist elite increases its power and wealth while the rest of us fall into servitude (all in the name of "economic development" of course!).

And what of Toffler's "new xenophobes"? Toffler rightly decries the racism and nationalism that have resurfaced in the United States and Europe in the past few years. But he mistakes the disease for the cure when he argues that the growth of a uniform consumer culture is the only way racial and ethnic tensions can be eliminated. The global economy breaks up, rather than promotes, an authentic sense of community by reducing everything — from culture to human relationships — to market commodities. "Cultural diversity" comes to mean little more than being able to choose among 150 different brands of shampoo or buying exotic fashions no one else has just so that we can be "different" from them. If natural sources of individual and community identity are denied, should we be surprised when more perverted forms arise (i.e., racism and nationalism)? What we need in place of Toffler's bland global uniformity is a genuine multiculturalism that encourages and respects diversity (maximizing diversity within the whole is a basic principle of ecological thinking).

The upside to the new feudalism, however, is the historical fact that peasant societies, old and new, usually develop highly cooperative forms of defense to protect themselves against the ravages of their oppressors. Such defenses will be increasingly important as it becomes obvious that the megacorporations have no interest whatsoever in creating an ecologically sustainable society for us in which everyone can enjoy the basic necessities of life. The new feudal lords are solely interested in increasing their own power, might, luxury, and wealth, even if it means pauperizing of the rest of us. Peasant revolts may be the only option open to us in the future, but for the present the very vacuity of modern consumer culture leaves ample space for the growth of genuine democratic alternatives. As Toffler himself warned, albeit with opposite intent, the choice between ecological sustainability and unlimited techno-economic development is a choice "between 21st-century democracy and 11th century darkness." □