

## Reading Between The Lines

By Richard Evanoff

Since I don't subscribe to the *International Herald Tribune*, Rick Davis, one of this journal's editors, occasionally sends me batches of clippings that he thinks I might find stimulating. The most recent batch is particularly interesting because it shows, I think, that the mainstream news media are finally catching on to the fact that most technology and economic growth are hurting rather than helping not only the environment, but also the lives of people in both the First and Third worlds. True, you can still find plenty of articles in the IHT with virtually amusing titles like "Using Cyberspace for Fun and Profit: Shopping, Amusement Parks are Commonest Uses in Japan," which shows how the present economic system can, with the help of virtual technology, divert popular attention from its own very real shortcomings and make enormous profits at the same time. It's also true that you can find articles that still give completely one-sided portrayals of economic development in the name of "objective" journalism. An article entitled "Retail Banking Booms as Thai Wealth Grows" (on the flip side of "Using Cyberspace for Fun and Profit") is filled with objective-looking facts and figures about Thailand's emerging middle class (and the record profits of the banking industry), but the cheerleading in favor of unlimited economic expansion over genuine ecological sustainability is unmistakable. I hardly think that duplicating the West's class divisions and overconsumptive lifestyles is something to cheer about.

It's amazing, of course, how many people take the media's rose-colored view of economic growth at face value without ever seeing all the greed, injustice, and ecological destruction that hides between the lines. In his book, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media*, Michael Parenti shows how the media not only provide society with "information" but also offer an entire worldview which, through a highly selective presentation of the facts, conditions people's ideas about what's "right" and "wrong."

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Ask for George

"good" and "bad," "true" and "false." Mainstream reporting has to be both simple and entertaining. Difficult or boring news that would alienate the audience must be avoided, no matter how important that news might be (forget the nitty gritty details of environmental reporting, for example). Moreover, to avoid alienating advertisers the reporting can under no circumstances criticize big business or challenge the economic status quo. (Challenging the political status quo is acceptable of course, first because politicians are not the ones who wield the real power in society anyway, and second because it distracts attention from the wealthy robber barons who do).

If the mainstream media are a person's only source of information, he or she is bound to have a distorted view of reality. To make matters worse, any sane person who challenges this "reality" (precisely because it's regarded as *Reality*, capital R) will then be dismissed as a nut case. I myself frequently have this problem — at least hope that it's for this reason. In a culture where images count for more than facts, it's pretty hard to get to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth unless you're willing to spend a lot of time digging through all the facts and figures. But, then, who wants to spend all that time at the library when we can just sit back in the comfort of our own living rooms and be infotained?

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Given my total lack of faith in the credibility of the mainstream media, imagine my surprise when, in the pile of IHT clippings Rick Davis had sent me, I started coming across articles with titles like "The Marketplace Can't Produce a Good Society Alone" and "When Development Rages, Culture and Environment Can Burn." I had to double-check that these were really from the *International Herald Tribune* and not copies of old ecoLogic columns I'd somehow forgotten about. An article entitled "Rich World, Poor World" starts out by quoting World Bank figures which show that the average income per person in the developing countries has doubled in the second half of the century, but then goes on to point out that wealth is not equally distributed and that the gap between the world's richest and poorest countries is widening: "While the world gets richer, more than a billion of the world's 5.6 billion people still live in dire poverty." I can still see someone using these facts as propaganda for more free trade and development, but I do appreciate the absence of rose-tinting in the glasses. Even more clear-sighted was an IHT cartoon that could have come straight out of almost any good alternative newspaper: on one side of a table marked "free

trade" is a multicultural group of Third-World laborers and on the other side a group of multinational businessmen who ask them, "All right, now... who wants to work the cheapest?"

An article by Paul Kennedy (the same guy who wrote *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*) entitled "The Jobs Crisis Is Worldwide, Ominous and Growing" stops short of questioning the future viability of modernization, but does point out the contradictory relationship between corporate downsizing and the world's need to create 40 million jobs annually just to keep up with population growth. Our jet-setting corporate leaders must be having so much fun that they haven't yet realized the revolutionary potential of millions of unemployed people hanging around the globe with lots of free time on their hands. On the same page with Kennedy is an article by Richard Reeves entitled, "Cheer Up, Downsizing Is Good News for Some," which points out that the average CEO in America now makes 149 times the pay of an average factory worker; the 23 CEOs who axed the most jobs in 1993 got pay raises averaging 30 percent; and the corporate share of income taxes has declined from 23 percent in the 1950s to just 9.2 percent today. That's the good news, at least if you're among the top 1 percent of Americans who have 50 percent of America's wealth. The bad news for the rest of us is that median earnings of American men with a college degree between the ages of 45 and 54 have fallen in constant dollars from \$55,000 in 1972 to \$41,898 20 years later (now figures for what's happened to the pay scales of women!); 18 percent of full-time (yes, *full-time*) American workers don't make enough in a year to keep themselves above the poverty line; and the number of children growing up in poverty in America has increased by 50 percent since 1973. Reeves goes on to blast the "financial analysts" cheerleading for Mattel Inc. (an American toy manufacturer), which announced just before Christmas that it would have record profits in 1994, its stock was up 19 percent — and it was proceeding with plans to lay off 1,000 of its 22,000 employees to further reduce costs, improve efficiency, and continue enjoying double-digit growth. (That's the news in America, of course; in Japan the IHT reports that a total of 120,000 jobs were eliminated in 1994 — more than 10 times the number of jobs cut in 1993. No wonder my senior students had a hard time job hunting this year!).

In a related article entitled "Profit Up and Employment Down, Anger Up and Civility Down," A.M. Rosenthal quotes a less enthusiastic analyst who suggests that the workforce will "cleave" into an elite of 25-30 percent, while the rest of us will be walking around with "loser" stickers on our foreheads. Another article, "Uncritical Faith in

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### Warming, from p. 3

National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York told the *Times* in 1995 that he is "more confident than ever" that there is "a real warming which is not just a chance fluctuation but is a long-term trend, and that trend is due to the greenhouse effect." Hansen in 1981 published the first paper showing that the average temperature of the Earth had, in fact, increased during the past 100 years, a finding that is now widely accepted; the *cause* of that temperature rise is still in dispute because not all *climatologists* are yet convinced that the greenhouse effect is causing the observable warming.

However, unlike climatologists, much of the insurance industry is coming around to the view that extremes of weather are increasing along with global temperature, and that greenhouse gases (CO<sub>2</sub> and others) are the cause. Munich Re, the world's largest re-insurance company (whose business is insuring insurance companies against catastrophic losses) observed in 1993 that in the 10-year period 1983-1992 insured losses from natural disasters were almost 12 times higher than in the decade of the 1960s, even allowing for inflation. Commenting on Munich Re's analysis, *Lloyd's List*

*International* (a publication of Lloyd's, the London insurance giant) writes, "The convenient theory that the increase in the size of losses is mainly a reflection of higher wealth — and consequently, of insured values — in those countries affected by natural disasters seems to be incorrect. It is far more likely that other causes, such as climatic changes, have already taken over as main factors pushing losses upwards."

In late 1993, Skandia, one of Sweden's largest insurance companies, stopped insuring weather-related damages. Ake Munkhammar, Skandia's expert on storms and natural catastrophes, said climatologists have the luxury of delaying their decision as to whether the bounds of natural variation in the weather have been exceeded, but insurance companies do not. Climate change could bankrupt the insurance industry, and, without insurance, civilization as we know it would be impossible.

— Peter Montague

(A shortened version of *Rachel's Environment & Health Weekly* #429, February 16, 1995. Reprinted with permission. For subscription information about this excellent publication, contact the Environmental Research Foundation, P.O. Box 5036, Annapolis, MD 21403 Fax (410) 263-8944; Internet: erf@igc.apc.org.)

### ecoLogic, from p. 6

High-Tech Progress," exposes the myth that there will be enough new high-tech jobs to replace all the low-paying jobs that are currently being eliminated. The article confesses, "That optimistic assumption may be false, and the real outcome may be 'catastrophic downfalls' for the losers in this new world order." The article goes on to admit that "the press has paid scant attention to these losers in its enthusiastic acceptance of the 'greater good' theories of the multinational corporations [and] the great financial institutions."

Used to be you could only find this kind of brutally honest reporting in alternative publications (like the one you're holding!). I'd like to think that the alternative press has had some kind of influence on mainstream coverage, but it's more likely that the problems we presently face are so obvious that they can no longer be ignored. In any event, I hope the average reader finally comes to understand what we nut cases in the alternative press have been saying for years: the multinationals are clearly not concerned about either jobs *or* the environment and only an ecologically sustainable economy can preserve both. (P.S. For great reading-between-the-lines see George Crane's and Steve Hesse's news shorts columns in every issue of JEM!) □