

The Blame Game

By Richard Evanoff

There's a quote from Vaclav Havel, the velvet underground dissident who helped usher in a post-communist Czech Republic, which I have taped up on the wall of my study. Havel said, "You do not become a 'dissident' just because you decide one day to take up this most unusual career. You are thrown into it by your personal sense of responsibility, combined with a complex set of external circumstances. You are cast out of the existing structures and placed in a position of conflict with them. It begins as an attempt to do your work well, and ends with being branded an enemy of society."

Environmentalists in particular, I think, are people who have recently been trying to do their work well but are ending being branded "enemies of society." In the Pacific Northwest, for example, environmentalists are accused of being more concerned about spotted owls than they are about people. The timber companies say that the ancient old-growth forests must be clearcut not only to keep the economy going, but to provide jobs. Many working class loggers support the companies and their concern about the future of their livelihoods is understandable. But as Herb Hammond points out in his essay, "Clearcutting: Ecological and Economic Flaws" (included in *Clearcut: The Tragedy of Industrial Forestry*, edited by Bill Devall), the real reason jobs are being lost in the Pacific Northwest is because companies simply cut the trees and then ship them elsewhere for processing, usually to developing countries where wages are much lower. If the companies were really concerned about preserving jobs, they would process the logs in the local communities where the logging is actually taking place. Local communities could then also be encouraged to develop sustainable industries based on logging, such as paper and furniture making. All of this economic activity would take place within the context of sustainable logging practices which would maintain a healthy economic — and ecological — base for the long-term future. In the short-term it's true that the logging companies can provide jobs, but once

the forests are gone the jobs will be gone as well. Who, then, are the real enemies of society?

Environmentalists are also accused of being against the poor, particularly in the Third World. According to capitalist propagandists, the only way the poor can be helped is through economic development. Here's how the argument goes: since the First World is more economically developed than the Third World, we have a moral obligation to "help" people in the Third World achieve standards of living similar to our own. In the nineteenth century imperialism was justified on the grounds that it was the "white man's burden" to help raise the material and spiritual standards of "primitive people." Nowadays everyone can see pretty clearly who imperialism really benefited; but why are we still so blind to whom overseas "development" really benefits? The main beneficiaries of all this international development are (1) elites in the First World who gain access to Third-World resources and markets, and (2) elites in the Third World who profit by selling off their country's resources and labor. The losers are the average people in both the First and Third World who find themselves working for exploitive wages (if they can find a job at all) in degraded environments.

Environmentalists are not opposed to improving people's genuine quality of life, but many indeed feel that the creation of a "global economy" is not the way to do it. The "global economy" is predicated on the idea that by making a bigger pie, everyone gets a bigger piece. Global capitalism not only ignores the ecological limits to how big a pie we can make, but it also ignores the issue of how nature's riches can be shared in a just and egalitarian manner. Given the fact that there are certain ecological limits to the size of the pie, environmentalists are particularly concerned with dividing it up in a fair manner so that everyone gets an equal piece. Anyone who has ever divided up a real pie for their children knows what I'm talking about — the method isn't by cutthroat competition to see who can get the biggest piece. Yet it's the environmentalists with their ethic of sharing rather than the advocates of unlimited development with their ethic of "greed is good" who somehow end up getting branded as the "enemies of society."

Environmentalists are also often portrayed as being against international cooperation. The theory goes that the global market will reduce political tensions by offering all of humanity a homogenized culture in which the world will be "one." International bodies such as the World Trade Organization will enmesh us all in one great global economy while the United Nations (or something like it) will one day give birth to a new world order based on political unity. People will beat their swords into computer chips and concentrate on the real business of the world, which is business. Some even go so far as to say that all this interdependence is based on

the ecological idea that in nature everything is related to everything else. How could environmentalists possibly be against all this "international cooperation"?

Well, the fact is that it's the elites again who are doing most of the cooperating. Economic decisions are made by large multinational cooperations that transcend both national boundaries and national laws. There are no democratic checks on what these transnationals do and most of the negotiations currently taking place to create the World Trade Organization are being done in secret. Ordinary people have no knowledge, and certainly no say, in how the global market will be constituted. The indication so far is that these secretive negotiators — beholden to the interests of big business — will simply come up with a set of rules that enable the transnationals to more efficiently exploit natural resources and human labor throughout the globe. At the same time they will try to avoid having to take any responsibility whatsoever for the devastation wreaked on local communities and the lives of ordinary people. But as resources are used up, it's inevitable that there will be increased, rather than decreased, tension and probably even open warfare between countries competing for resources and markets. Add to this the increased tension caused by the growing gap between rich and poor throughout the world and the threat of war becomes even more probable. Even a rejuvenated United Nations will not be of much help in preventing the chaos and anarchy that are likely to result. Who then, we might ask, are the true defenders of both democracy and civilization?

The genuinely ecological model for a "world order" is based on the principle of unity in diversity. Ultimate economic and political power should be democratically controlled by local communities, even though these communities may decide to federate into larger units to work on common problems. Nonetheless the base of power would not be national, or even international, but local; power would move from the bottom up — not from the top down as it increasingly seems to be doing. Keeping power in local hands is the antithesis of both capitalism, which concentrates power in the hands of business, and communism, which concentrates power in the hands of the state. Maintaining local control would allow local cultures to flourish and prevent them from being swallowed up by the Molochian monoculture of a global market and a supposedly unified world order. None of this precludes the possibility for cooperation, of course; indeed many of our most serious environmental problems, such as global warming and acid rain, will only be solved by worldwide cooperation. The environmental vision is in fact to *extend* the cooperative process so that everyone in the world can be democratically

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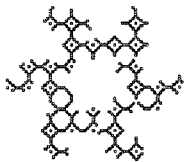
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see ecoLogic, p. 20

ecoLogic, from p. 3

involved rather than restrict participation to a handful of world elites. Preserving democracy in the purest sense of the word is probably also our best hope for preserving civilization, but again, it's the environmentalists who are usually accused of being against international cooperation — and therefore against civilization.

I will confess that, like Vaclav Havel, I am a dissident. I am unrepentantly opposed to a social, economic, and political order based on hierarchy, greed, and corruption, which ultimately promotes *both* social injustice *and* ecological collapse. And I will do everything legally in my power to undermine, subvert, and hasten the demise of this order. But please do not label me an "enemy of society." The society I am doing my best to see realized is a society based on egalitarianism, sharing, and integrity which ultimately promotes *both* social justice *and* ecological sustainability. □



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Whales, from p. 15

I don't know what has possessed the Citizens' Recycle Movement and Nippon Ecology Network to espouse the government's corrupted line on whaling. The Japanese government is often evasive, but its vigorous embrace of half-truths, downright lies, self-defeating attitudes, and outdated wildlife conservation policy with respect to the whaling issue is in a class by itself. Why would an "environmental" citizens' group fly in the face of common sense? Is it ignorance about wildlife conservation biology? Let's hope they are open-minded enough to honestly reconsider their position.

Meantime, it is frightening that ordinary people belonging to natural food cooperatives don't realize there is anything wrong with "scientific whaling." I suppose there will always be more people concerned with their own health and desires than with the survival of wildlife, and so the awareness of people about pesticides in their food is bound to be more advanced than their awareness about wildlife conservation, particularly when organic food is so much more delicious than supermarket food. Still, it is a testimony to the stranglehold the compromised mass media have on even the relatively aware citizen. □

RAN, from p. 19

is not just destroying forests overseas, it's destroying U.S. forests, and it's destroying our own local economics."

Marx adds that recent statistics also indicate that MI, while shipping U.S. logs *out*, continues to be a major *importer* of wood into the United States. "They are shipping tropical timber from every major exporting country in the world: mahogany from Brazil, Bolivia, Belize, and Guatemala; meranti from Indonesia and Malaysia; iuan from the Philippines; and teak brokered through Singapore, or originating in Thailand." In light of the recent findings, RAN plans to increase the pressure on MI over the coming months.

A condensed report on "Mitsubishi in the Forest" is now available through RAN. The report details Mitsubishi Corporation's various operations around the world and their impact on the environment and local communities.

From *Action Alert 105*, February 1995. For more information on how to join RAN and help, write: Rainforest Action Network, 450 Sansome, Suite 700, San Francisco, CA 94111, USA. Phone 415-398-4404.

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20