

## "ENOUGHNESS" TALK—January 4, 2004—UUCWI

### Opening Reading

(The following reading is excerpted from a report of the *National Geographic News*, 1/10/2002)

"The News in the Worldwatch Institute's annual State of the World report for 2002 is not good. Nearly every global environmental indicator has worsened over the last decade, the authors say, and the gap between rich and poor has widened. The report takes a hard look at world accomplishments in the decade following the Rio Earth Summit. To many, the U.N.-sponsored conference signaled a fundamental reordering of world priorities. But ten years later, environmental degradation, Third World indebtedness, poverty, pollution, global warming, and a lack of enforcement of international treaties all continue to be issues.

"The report is laced with gloomy facts; e.g., more than one billion people are living on one dollar (U.S.) a day, at the same time that developed nations are enjoying an epidemic of obesity. Deforestation proceeds apace, desertification continues to edge outward, and 27 percent of the world's coral reefs are now severely damaged, up from 9 percent in 1992. The resulting loss and degradation of habitat has meant that we are also undergoing a huge loss in biodiversity. The authors note that the Earth is currently experiencing a mass extinction event that has been equaled only four times in the last four billion years.

"State of the World 2002 emphasizes the linkages between environmental degradation and human quality of life issues. More than 1.1 billion people on the planet lack access to safe drinking water, and nearly 3 billion do not have access to adequate sanitation. In addition to the grinding poverty that this connotes, it also means that waterborne diseases claim the lives of between 14,000 to 30,000 people a day, which is the equivalent of several September 11th tragedies, every day, year in year out—but without the media attention," the report authors note.

"Climate change is probably the biggest problem facing the world today, and one where not a lot of improvement has been seen. Carbon dioxide emissions, the most potent of greenhouse gases, have risen globally by more than 9 percent in the last decade, with U.S. emissions rising by 18 percent. At the same time, the science surrounding climate change has become more certain that emissions are accelerating the pace of global warming, and that rising global temperatures can be solidly attributed to human activities.

"Climate change is global in scope, it presents a mix of environmental and social problems, and there's an equity issue, in that the nations most responsible for causing the problem are the least likely to suffer from it, e.g., the U.S. is likely to be affected the least by rising temperatures."

I'd like to do a couple things today: first—spend just a little more time dealing with the extent of the problems identified in the reading; and second—take a look at what causes those problems, what needs to be done to solve them, and why that might be hard.

To begin, I'd like to provide some brief background information. English Economist James Robertson wrote "The world's present path of economic development is damaging to both people and the Earth. This damage is being done by a world population that is now just over 6 billion people. Of these, about a quarter live in the so-called "developed" countries. Per capita, that quarter consumes far more than the three quarters in the developing countries, e.g., 15 times as much paper, 10 times as much steel, 12 times as much energy. So even with a stationary world population, if consumption in poor countries were brought up to present rich-country levels this would multiply today's ecological impacts something like 10 times over. And population will not remain stable. By the year 2050 the United Nations' medium projection is a world population of about 9 billion. It is not expected to stabilize below about 10 billion, over half-again as many people as what it is today. For today's rich-country consumption levels to be achieved by the whole of a world population of that size would mean multiplying today's ecological impacts some 20 or 30 times over. (December 26, 1989, edition of *New Options*. The article was adapted from "Future Wealth: A New Economics for the 21st Century," by English Economist James Robertson.)

Clearly, that is not even remotely possible. (In fact, I just read of a brand new study that compared humans with other species. It concluded that there are presently 1,000 times too many humans to be sustainable.) Even if this isn't accurate, it's obvious that we must find a way to reduce the ecological impacts which are created by the level and style of production and consumption found in the developed countries. But how should we do this? The typical response in our scientific-industrial societies is to attack each specific, isolated problem head-on. Here's a quick illustration of how that works. In the late 1980s, Britain's Friends of the Earth engaged in a campaign to halt the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in aerosols, sprays, and other processes, because they were destroying the ozone layer. Problem: Use of CFCs. Solution: Get rid of them. So Friends of the Earth got out on the streets and told consumers, "You've got to stop buying aerosols that use CFCs." Result: almost total success. By 1990, only 5% of aerosols in the UK were still using CFCs compared with 65% two years earlier. In a very short period of time, a massive shift had taken place. But what does that actually mean? In 1990, 800 million aerosols were still produced and used in Britain. They didn't contain CFCs, so we may feel marginally more confident about the state of the ozone layer. But these aerosols are not suddenly environmentally benign. They use alternative propellants like propane or butane and contain a range of other chemicals. Their manufacture involves a lot of resource use—800 million aerosols takes quite a bit of raw material—and since they are thrown away after use, it takes a lot of holes in the ground to get rid of them." (Utne Reader, November-December, 1989, "Seeing Green: How We Can Create a More Satisfying Society" by Jonathon Porritt).

So why is it that only an isolated piece of the problem gets solved? Because conventional economic development of the industrialized world requires firms to maximize returns and minimize costs in the short term in order to keep growing and not be swallowed up in a competitive market economy. They must "grow or die." In an article in *The Progressive* magazine, Murray Bookchin says that "we live in an inherently anti-ecological world. This condition will not be healed by acts of statesmanship or passage of piecemeal legislation. It is a world that is direly in need of far-reaching structural change." He says "Perhaps the most obvious of our systemic problems is uncontrollable growth. This growth is not humanity's colonization of the planet over millennia of history. It is rather an inexorable reality that is unique to our era: namely, that unlimited economic growth is assumed to be evidence of human progress. We have taken this notion so much for granted over the past few generations, that it is as immutably fixed in our consciousness as the sanctity of property

itself." (The Progressive, August, 1989. "Death of a Small Planet" by Murray Bookchin)

Herman Daly, author of the book *The Steady State Economy* agrees. He writes "Unless the underlying growth paradigm and its supporting values are altered, all the technical prowess and manipulative cleverness in the world will not solve our problems and, in fact, will make them worse. As long as we remain trapped by the ideology of competitive growth, there is no solution." He relates the "story of the South Indian monkey trap, in which a hollowed-out coconut is fastened to a stake by a chain and filled with rice. There is a hole in the coconut just large enough for the monkey to put his extended hand through but not large enough to withdraw his fist full of rice. The monkey is trapped only by his inability to reorder his values, to recognize that freedom is worth more than the handful of rice. We seem to be in a similar position. The value of growth is rigidly held in first place, and we are trapped into a system of increasing environmental disruption and gross injustices by our inability to reorder values, to open our fist and let go of the growth paradigm." Daly says "For growthmania there is no such thing as 'enough,'. Indeed, the whole idea seems to be to try to fill a spiritual void with material commodities and technological razzle-dazzle." (Daly, Herman E, *Steady State Economics*, 1977, W. H. Freeman and Co.).

Where did the idea of unlimited economic growth come from? It seems to have come about in conjunction with the creation of a consumer society. It wasn't always that way, even though it has always been necessary for people to consume resources in order to live. Consumption evolved, however, as people found ways to make their survival less tenuous through the development of farming and domestication of animals along with the development of better weapons and tools. Having a stash of extra food plus animals outside the door allowed people to survive periods when hunting and gathering didn't pan out. As technology advanced and excess wealth was produced, stronger, smarter, and craftier people found ways to control the production and distribution of goods, so that they got more of it. The pursuit of getting and spending by the wealthy elites has a long history. Possessions satisfied more than personal greed; they also had important social and political functions too, e.g., distinguishing royalty, nobility, priests, etc. Religious and other belief systems promoted the idea of limited consumption for the masses of poor, and their consumption was limited to necessities. Saving and being frugal were virtues encouraged by the wealthy—for the poor.

In the past, the acquisitive part of society was a tiny one. In England, other European nations, and the United States, full-blown commercialized consumption did not become largely expanded until the twentieth century. The enormous wealth coming from the colonized countries spurred the industrial revolution, which, in turn, led to the "crisis" of overproduction in the late 19th century and thus to the need to create a mass consumer class. Now it was necessary to change the spiritual and intellectual values of the potential consumers from an emphasis on thrift, modesty, and moderation, to a value system that encouraged spending and ostentatious display. Part of this process was to transform the meaning of goods and how they were presented, and to turn what were once luxuries into necessities. One way of accomplishing this was to make the department store evolve into a place to display goods as objects in themselves. These stores became cultural primers, telling people how they should dress, furnish their homes, and spend their leisure time. Another revolutionary development in influencing the creation of a class of consumers was advertising. The goal of the advertisers was to aggressively shape consumer desires and create value in commodities by imbuing them with the power to transform the consumer into a more desirable person, and the fear that they would miss out or be inferior if they did not make the proper purchases. In 1880, only \$30 million was invested in advertising in the

United States, while now, that figure has climbed to well over \$120 billion, and to twice that worldwide.

In the early 20th century, the major institutions of our society, including education, governmental agencies, financial institutions, and even the family, were transformed to promote the consumption of commodities. According to anthropologist Richard Robbins, Herbert Hoover set up the U.S. Commerce Department in 1921 to support American business and gave it the major goal of helping to encourage consumption. In the late 1920s this agency initiated the Census of Distribution, a once-a-decade consumer research study, that detailed where the consumers were, and what quantities of goods they would consume. The Commerce Department endorsed retail and cooperative advertising and advised merchants on service devices, fashion, style, and display methods of all kinds. Robbins also notes that single family home ownership was emphasized over multiunit dwellings. In his memoirs, Hoover wrote that "a primary right of every American family is, at least once, to build and own a new house of its heart's desire; one that would include one's own arrangement of gadgets, rooms, and surroundings." The Commerce Department flooded the country with public relations material on "home buying" ideas, producing a leaflet and film on owning your own home. In addition to single-family dwellings, they recommended a separate bedroom for each child, saying it was "undesirable for two children to occupy the same bed ... whatever their age." The material produced by the Commerce Department all promoted maximum consumption.

In America in the '60s there was a lot of activism (some aimed at corporations and their exploitative drive for profits). This activism threatened the political and economic stability of the power holders. Psychological research was undertaken by corporate America and various research institutions to understand and categorize people into predictable behaviors and be able to get them to express their individuality by purchasing products industry would produce specifically to meet these needs. This not only boosted the American economy, but subtly imposed social control through loosening strong political and social activism as individuals explored and fulfilled their individual desires through the purchase of material goods. The shaping of people's choices and opinions came from the pressures and skill of big business, to which now even governments had to succumb to gain power. And, although people's desires were listened to, people's democratic rights and broader powers were being undermined; a process that's been attempted for centuries by the elites of the time. With these types of transformations, the consumer society has evolved in such a way, that consumption and consumerism (rather than citizenship) is identified as being at the core of a modern culture and society. This transformation is fascinating and there is a lot of very interesting information about how it encouraged.

I'd like briefly to shift to a related topic now, the role of corporations in the creation and maintenance of our consumer society. Alexis de Tocqueville, in the 1830s, noted that "citizens of the new American republic had seized upon every opportunity to take a hand in the government of society and to talk about it." He thought that, "if an American should be reduced to occupying himself with his own affairs, half his existence would be snatched from him." But de Tocqueville had already detected a threat to the "equality of conditions" he so admired in America. "The friends of democracy should keep their eyes anxiously fixed on the industrial aristocracy," he said. "For if ever again permanent inequality of conditions and aristocracy make their way into the world it will have been by that door that they entered."

I'm going to quote at length here from an article in the Nov.-Dec. issue of Orion magazine

titled "Consent of the Governed" by Jeffrey Kaplan. "As late as 1840, state legislators closely supervised the operation of corporations. ... But in the headlong rush into the Industrial Age, legislators and the courts stripped away almost all of those limitations. By the 1860s, most states had granted owners limited liability, waiving virtually all personal accountability for an institution's cumulative actions. In 1886, without comment, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled for corporate owners, allowing corporations to be considered 'persons,' thereby opening the door to free speech and other civil rights under the Bill of Rights. By the early 1890s, states had largely eliminated restrictions on corporations owning each other, and by 1904, 318 corporations owned forty percent of all manufacturing assets. ... Throughout the twentieth century, federal courts have granted U.S. corporations additional rights that once applied only to human beings—including those of 'due process' and 'equal protection.' Corporations, in turn, have used those rights to thwart democratic efforts to check their growth and influence." Here's an example: "When an agribusiness group filed suit over some anti-corporate farming laws in a local area in Pennsylvania, the first page of the lawsuit said 'we, the corporations, are people and this ordinance violates our personhood rights.'" I don't begin to understand all the free trade regulations, but we are now in the situation where an unelected body of corporate representatives can override the desires of local, state, and even national governments if they are incompatible with free trade. "as de Tocqueville predicted, the industrial aristocrats have prevailed in America (and are extending their power around the globe). They have garnered enormous power over the past 150 years through the inexorable development of the modern corporation. Having achieved extensive control over so many facets of our lives—from food and clothing production to information, transportation, and other necessities—corporate institutions have become more powerful than the sovereign people who originally gave them life."

Are we stuck with this situation? Is there an obvious way out? I don't know. Based on much careful analysis, Herman Daly concluded that "A steady-state economy is a necessary and desirable future state of affairs and its attainment requires quite major changes in values, as well as radical, but non-revolutionary, institutional reforms. Once we have replaced the basic premise of 'more is better' with the much sounder axiom that 'enough is best,' the social and technical problems of moving to a steady state become solvable, perhaps even trivial." In order to live by the axiom of "enough is best," he suggests that the values by which human behavior needs to be governed are "enoughness, stewardship, humility, and holism, and the goals of people's lives should be : "wisdom, enjoyment [or happiness in the Aristotelean sense], cultivation of the mind and soul, and community."

What keeps us from making the changes Daly calls for? For one thing, most of us in this country enjoy the benefits that derive from the economic growth paradigm. Surely with the high standard of living we enjoy, we must be the happiest people who have ever lived; right? Not so says psychologist Paul Wachtel, in his book *The Poverty of Affluence*. In fact he concludes that the kind of consumerism needed to keep the economy growing cannot make us happy. He says that "An economy primarily driven by growth must generate discontent. We cannot be content or the entire economic machine would grind to a halt." Wachtel's main thrust is that "Our present stress on growth and productivity is intimately related to the decline in rootedness. Faced with the loneliness and vulnerability that come with deprivation of a securely encompassing community, we have sought to quell the vulnerability through our possessions. When we can buy nice new things, when we look around and see our homes well stocked and well equipped, we feel strong and expansive rather than small and endangered. But the comfort we achieve tends to be short-lived. Our efforts to achieve a sense of security and well-being in this fashion have ironic consequences. Their effect is further to undermine

more traditional sources of security and thus to commit us to the pursuit of still further material progress as compensation. We chase around frantically filling up the holes we have just dug, with little recognition or understanding of what we are doing and still less ability to stop." (Wachtel, Paul L, *The Poverty of Affluence*, 1989, New Society Publishers). This idea gets stated again and again, e.g., see the article in today's *Parade Magazine* titled "When It's All Too Much." It concludes "This is the paradox: here we are, living at the pinnacle of human possibility, awash in material abundance. We get what we say we want, only to discover that it doesn't satisfy us."

So, I ask again, why can't we break out of this? I think there are a number of very powerful factors that make it incredibly difficult to get off the growth train. First is the absolutely ubiquitous nature of the consumer society in which we live and breath and have our being. We almost cannot think about life in any other way—it is like the air we breath and the ground on which we walk. We are bombarded, virtually all the time, with messages that we need to consume to be OK. We live in fear, and consumption of new stuff helps keep those feelings subconscious. The movie "Bowling for Columbine" by Michael Moore talks about the "culture of fear" in which we live. The news and much of the programming on TV operates according to the axiom of "if it bleeds it leads." One study of news programming showed that, while murders in a particular time period had gone down by 20%, the coverage of murders on the evening news went up by 600%. We are led to believe that our communities are much more dangerous than they really are: in one community where crime went down every year for eight years, gun ownership, particularly of hand guns, increased. The powerful elites are smart, have lots of money, and, I believe will do almost anything to be sure that economic growth is not halted until it finally crashes, probably not in any of our lifetimes.

Another factor is, I think there are some powerful instinctive reactions we have inherited from our hunter-gatherer ancestors which play right into the continuation of the economic paradigm of growth through consumption. We have survived as a species by being fearful of people outside our group who may be there to enslave or kill us. On the other hand, humans have an insatiable desire to explore, to create, to keep from being bored. Technological development and consumerism are the modern scratches for this itch. Bill McKibben has written a new book titled "*Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age*" The essence of the book is that humans are on the verge of crossing the line from being born to being made, and he warns that we risk the loss of all meaning if we step across that threshold. Listen to two reactions to this book: [It would seem that to follow McKibben's recommendations would hold back our very natural human drives of survival and exploration. We humans have no choice but to move forward into gradually expanding brave new worlds, which is what we have always done, in order to make our species stronger and better able to survive.] and [McKibben, who is just another self-righteous, ignorant Luddite, is a control freak who thinks he knows what's best for you. He will continue to spew apocalyptic tripe deploring the way most Americans prefer to live, work, enjoy and, one day, re-engineer themselves.]

I don't know how to neatly end this. I know I should always leave you with a positive feeling that there is something we can do as individuals to solve the problems I've been talking about. Unfortunately I don't think there is anything we, as individuals, can do to make meaningful change, other than be bright and resourceful enough to start a grass roots, mass movement that brings the system down in a way that does not create a nuclear war. I hope one of you is that bright person and I would now love to hear anything anyone has to say about the issues I've raised.

(After receiving numerous challenges to my comment about the powerlessness of individuals, I'd like to revise the wording a bit, hopefully, to bring it closer to what I meant. Of course, nothing can be done unless individuals are doing it. But an individual, doing something on her or his own, is like a single drop of water somewhere in the landscape. Making a lake requires a mass of droplets coalescing in a basin. Unless an individual has such a brilliant concept that a mass of others pick it up and create a mass movement, putting one's energy into a movement that seems most likely to succeed is the only way to make the huge value and structural changes that are needed to move from an unlimited growth paradigm to a steady state.)

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