

The Social Costs of Globalisation - from the Johannesburg Ecologist 2002

“... America is a new kind of society that produces a new kind of human being. That human being – confident, self-reliant, tolerant, generous, future-oriented – is a vast improvement over the wretched, servile, fatalistic and intolerant human being that traditional societies have always produced.”

- Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About America*¹

Implicit in all the rhetoric our leaders spout about globalisation is the idea that the rest of the world should eventually be brought up to the standard of living of the West, and America in particular. Read between the lines of the 'sustainable development' argument and you'll find the American Dream lurking: it is globalisation's touchstone, its apparent endpoint.

But if this is the direction globalisation is taking us, it is worth examining where America itself is headed. A good way to do so is to take a hard look at America's children, since so many features of the global monoculture have been in place their whole lives. They are like canaries in a mineshaft: if the American Dream isn't working for them, why should anyone, anywhere, believe it would work better for their own children?

As it turns out, children in the US are far from “confident, self-reliant, tolerant, generous, and future-oriented”. One indication of this is that an estimated five million of them are being given at least one psychiatric drug. This disturbing trend is growing rapidly. The number of children ages 2-4 for whom stimulant and anti-depressant drugs have been prescribed increased 50 percent between 1991 and 1995. In the following four years, prescriptions for anti-depression drugs rose even more steeply, climbing 151 percent for children in the 7-12 age group, and 580 percent for children six and under.²

For most people in the less 'developed' world it is impossible to imagine 2-year old children so depressed that they need prescription drugs. Equally hard to fathom are many other symptoms of social breakdown among America's children. Eating disorders, for example. The number of pre-pubescent children with eating disorders is on the rise, with girls as young as four showing signs of anorexia. Cosmetic surgery, another symptom of insecurity and poor self-image, is also on

the increase, with the number of teen-age girls having their breasts augmented quadrupling, and liposuction procedures tripling, in just the past five years.³

What about violence, which is a more common symptom of breakdown for boys? Consider the fact that there have been at least 25 school shootings in the US since 1996, claiming the lives of 35 students. The youngest killer? A six-year old boy.⁴

What has made America's children so insecure and troubled? A number of causes are surely involved, all of which can be traced back to the global economy. As corporations scour the world for bigger subsidies and lower costs, jobs move with them, and families as well: the typical American moves eleven times during their life, constantly severing connections between relatives, neighbours and friends.

Within almost every family, the economic pressures on parents systematically rob them of time with even their own children. Americans put in longer hours at work than people in any other industrialised country, and the trend is ever upward: Americans work the equivalent of one week longer per year than they did a decade ago, more than five weeks longer than in 1970.⁵ As a consequence more and more young children are relegated to the care of strangers in crowded day-care centres. Older children are often left in the company of violent video games or the corporate sponsors of their favourite television shows. Time spent in nature – fundamentally important to our psychological well being – is increasingly rare.

Globalisation and the spreading consumer culture thus work to displace the flesh-and-blood role models – parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbours – that children once looked up to, replacing them with media and advertising images: rakish movie and rock stars, steroid-enhanced athletes and airbrushed supermodels. Children who strive to emulate these manufactured 'perfect' idols are left feeling insecure and inadequate.

In this sense, what is often seen as American 'culture' is not a product of the American people. It is, in fact, an artificial consumer culture being foisted on people through advertising and the media. This consumer culture is fundamentally different from all those cultures which for millennia were shaped by climate and topography – by a dialogue between humans and the natural world. This is a new phenomenon, something that has never happened before: a culture determined by technological and economic forces, rather than human and ecological needs. It is not surprising that American children, many of whom seem to 'have everything', are so unhappy: like their parents, their teachers at school and even their television

heroes, they have been put on a treadmill that is ever more stressful and competitive, ever more meaningless and lonely.

America's children are among the first victims of a culture shaped by commercial interests and media moguls, and an increasing number of Americans are waking up to this fact. There is a growing trend towards turning the television off, towards consciously seeking nature and community instead. These are incredibly important and hopeful signs.

Nevertheless, as the globalisation juggernaut steamrolls along the number of victims worldwide is growing exponentially. Today millions of children from Mongolia to Patagonia are targets of a fanatical and fundamentalist campaign to bring them into the consumer culture. The cost is massive in terms of self-rejection, psychological breakdown and violence. These children are just as vulnerable as their American counterparts to the sales pitches of corporate advertisers, who tell them that this brand of make-up will inch them closer to perfection, or that wearing that brand of sneakers will make them more like their sports hero. Sales of dangerous bleach for skin and hair, and contact lenses advertised as 'the colour of eyes you wish you were born with', are skyrocketing in the South.

This psychological impoverishment is accompanied by a massive rise in material poverty. Even in America a decade-long economic 'boom' could not lift an estimated 35 million people above the poverty line. And what about the millions drawn into rapidly growing Third World slums every year, with little hope of escape? What about the factory workers in sweatshops and maquiladoras, and the small farmers in their dying rural communities? What about the indigenous peoples being driven to extinction, and those whose ways of life are so threatened by the forces of globalisation that they turn to fundamentalism, even terrorism?

The central hope of the American Dream – that our children will have a better life than we do – seems to have vanished. Many people, in fact, no longer believe that our children really have any future at all.

Nonetheless policymakers insist that globalisation is bringing a better world for everyone. How can there be such a gap between the cheerleading rhetoric and the lives of real people? Part of the disconnect results from the way globalisation's promoters measure 'progress'. It is all too easy to compare America's consumer cornucopia today with what was available 50 or 150 years ago. More often, the baseline from which comparisons are made is rooted in the Dickensian period of

the early industrial revolution, when exploitation and deprivation, pollution and squalor were rampant. From this starting point, our child-labour laws and 40-hour workweek look like real progress.

Similarly, the baseline in the Third World is the immediate post-colonial period, with its uprooted cultures, poverty, over-population and political instability. Based on the misery of these starting points, political leaders can argue that our technologies and our economic system have brought a far better world into being, and that globalisation will bring benefits to the “wretched, servile, fatalistic and intolerant human beings” in the remaining ‘undeveloped’ parts of the world.

In reality, however, globalisation is a continuation of a broad process that started with the age of conquest and colonialism in the South and the Enclosures and the Industrial Revolution in the North; from then on a single culture and economic system has relentlessly expanded, taking over other cultures, other peoples’ resources and labour. Far from delivering us from poverty, the globalising industrial system continually creates it.

Today, on the eve of the Johannesburg summit, it is vital that we connect growing physical and emotional poverty – whether inside or outside the US – to the whole industrial system, to a history that included robbing people from all over the world of their natural resources, labour and self-respect. Our leaders simply fail to connect the dots between ‘progress’ and poverty.

Erasing other cultures, replacing them with an artificial culture created by corporations and the media can only lead to an increase in social breakdown and poverty. Even in the narrowest economic terms, globalisation means continuing to rob, rather than enrich, the majority. In 1960, the income of the richest fifth of the global population was 30 times that of the poorest fifth; by 1997 the gap more than doubled, with the richest fifth receiving 74 times more than the poorest fifth.⁶ This is globalisation at work.

By forcing everyone on the planet to rely on the same, narrow range of resources, globalisation is creating artificial scarcity, thereby adding to real poverty and exacerbating violent conflict. Contrary to the often-repeated claim that global trade is making conflict less likely, a recent World Bank study has found that countries whose economies are highly specialised – precisely what the free traders prescribe – are 20 times more likely to find themselves in civil war than countries whose economies are diversified.⁷

With those in the industrialised world using ten times their share of the earth's resources, it is a criminal hoax to promise that everyone in the 'undeveloped' world can do the same. The global spread of this fantasy has been profoundly destructive to people's ability to survive in their own cultures, in their own place on the earth. It has even been destructive to its most privileged beneficiaries. America's children are telling us we need a very different dream – one shaped by culture and nature, not by corporate greed.

¹ Dinesh D'souza, *What's So Great About America* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2002).

² Statistics from the National Disease and Therapeutic Index of IMS Health, in Lawrence H. Diller, M.D., "Kids on drugs", <http://www.salon.com/health/feature/2000/03/09/kiddrugs/index.html>, March 9, 2000

³ "Shaping the Perfect Teenager", CBSnews.com, June 22, 2000.

⁴ "A Time Line of Recent Worldwide School Shootings", www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0777958.html

⁵ Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American*, (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

⁶ UNDP, "The Facts of Global Life", presskit for *Human Development Report 1999*, www.undp.org/hdro/E5.html

⁷ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War", March 2002, <http://econ.worldbank.org/programs/conflict/library/doc?id=12205>