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Countering the Corporate Goosestep: Ralph Nader and Grassroots Strategies  
by Rick Wilcox and Richard Evanoff

On November 31, 1996, Ralph Nader spoke in Tokyo at a lecture sponsored by Japan's Seikatsu Club Consumer Cooperative on the theme "Grassroots Strategies for the 21st Century." Nader has been to Japan often and his message is especially interesting now that he has been a candidate for President of the United States, representing the U.S. Green Party in last November's election.

*Corporate control.* If there is one concept that has relentlessly cropped up in Nader's decades-long crusades, it is that of combating the abuse of corporate power. Nader first came to public attention in the U.S. when his book, *Unsafe at any Speed*, exposed the dangers of vehicles being produced by the U.S. auto industry.

Over the years Nader's theme of democratic and civic involvement in the face of growing corporate hegemony has served as a touchstone for grassroots activists in the U.S. and Japan.

It was especially appropriate that Nader's talk in Japan was sponsored by Seikatsu Club, which Nader praised for serving as a model for the global grassroots community. Its "vision for establishing a sustainable, democratic economy" is increasingly becoming well-known in Green circles, along with the efforts of other cooperatives such as Mondragon in Spain.

But why grassroots strategies for the 21st century?

As has been widely acknowledged among citizen groups, NGOs, and environmentalists, such strategies are imperative in order to combat what Nader referred to in his speech as the trend towards "the domination of the world by multinational corporations in very close alliance with authoritarian political trends." When big business is combined with big government the result is not democracy, but a "corporate state," not of the people, by the people, and for the people, but "of the Exxons, by the General Motors, and for the Duponts."

The modern corporate state pursues profits rather than the goals and well-being of people and mobilizes governments against their own people. Whenever there is a concentration of power and wealth, the few will dominate the many. Government is increasingly being used as a tool for multinationals to consolidate their power against democratic interests. As dominant institutions, corporations make sure that the public sees issues the same way they do.

*"Growing up corporate" vs. "Growing up civic."* In his speech Nader drew a distinction between "corporate-dominated cultures" and "civil-democratic cultures." "Growing up corporate" means buying into a consumer culture where we are enticed to consume more and more products whether they are good for us and the environment or not. Cars, for example, are advertised in terms of speed, convenience, power, style, and prestige. No mention is made in the advertising of the pollution they cause, the fuel they waste, or the dangers people face when driving them.

Nader pointed out that contemporary marketing strategies appeal to our sensual rather than our intellectual selves and utilize addiction (the tobacco industry), vanity (the

cosmetic industry), and violence (from video games to the weapons industry) to get us to buy products. While trivial conveniences are emphasized, necessities are neglected. The entertainment business is booming, but housing and health care are lagging.

“Growing up civic” means taking responsibility for our own lives and the societies we live in. It involves basic things, such as getting accurate information about the nutrition and safety of the food we eat. The food industry offers us processed food that looks pretty, is easy to chew and easy to prepare, but that often contains harmful additives and lacks real nutritional value.

“Growing up civic” also involves creating alternative institutions (such as Seikatsu and many other consumer cooperatives throughout Japan) which strive to produce safe products made in a socially responsible and environmentally sustainable manner. At a more basic level, it means taking back the right of citizens to make democratic decisions about the rules that govern society, rather than simply conceding such power to the corporate-government complex.

Nader stated, “The corporate institution in its global form has all the rights of individual human beings but also has privileges and immunities that individuals do not have.” In the U.S., for example, corporations can deduct the millions of dollars they spend lobbying Congress from their income tax while individuals aren’t even allowed to deduct the price of an airline ticket if they go to Washington to lobby their congressional representatives.

*Strategies for change.* In order to counter the corporate gosestep Nader called for citizens to think “civic” instead of eating, breathing, and thinking “corporate.” Nader pointed out that because we are taught to think corporate, we fail to see how corporations are creating an unhealthy society.

Nader’s speech coincides with a growing perception that we can expect even further increases in crime, violence, racial tension, divorce, unemployment, and the like as corporations close down factories at home, move their operations overseas, and destroy entire communities just so that they can exploit the low wages, lax environmental regulations, child labor, and minimal taxes (and a corresponding lack of social services) of so-called “underdeveloped” countries.

Corporations pay a declining share of taxes yet receive enormous government subsidies and bailouts (Nader coined the term “corporate welfare” at least four decades ago). Ordinary citizens, on the other hand, face increased taxes but less money is available for basic health, education, and welfare for the truly needy.

Nader reminds us that corporations are chartered by the state and charged with promoting the public good. If corporations do not promote the public good, however, it should be possible for the public to demand that their charters be revoked.

Citizens also need to be aware of their public heritage. Public property, such as public land and public airwaves, are currently being “privatized” in the name of economic efficiency. Even as that heritage is being robbed and plundered, citizens end up subsidizing the process through regressive and environmentally unsound tax policies.

In a document entitled “The Concord Principles: An Agenda for a New Initiatory Democracy,” Nader argues that, as owners of public property, citizens have a right to exercise public control over that property. He also argues that taxpayers should be able to have final say in how their tax dollars are spent.

Nader calls for a new “democracy tool box” that gives citizens more access to information about what’s really going on in the government and with corporations, as well as more genuine political power to participate in the decision-making process. Some of the specific proposals he recommends are public rather than corporate campaign financing, easier ballot access for third parties, binding referendums (at the state level in the U.S.), free computerized access to government information, and protection for whistle-blowers who expose corporate misdeeds.

*Accessing information.* A good introduction to the topic of corporate domination is *The Case Against “Free Trade”* (San Francisco: Earth Island Press, 1993), which includes articles by Nader, Vandana Shiva, Wendell Berry, Herman Daly, and Jerry Mander. Other recommended books are Tim Lang and Colin Hines’ *The New Protectionism: Protecting the Future against Free Trade* (London: Earthscan, 1993) and David Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (London: Earthscan, 1995).

For audio cassettes of talks given by Ralph Nader (and many others with similar concerns) write for a catalogue from Alternative Radio, P.O. Box 551, Boulder, Colorado 80306 U.S.A.

The following are some selected Internet resources:

- Essential Information <<http://www.essential.org>>
- Multinational Monitor Online  
<<http://www.essential.org/monitor/monitor.html>>
- Multinationals Resource Center  
<<http://www.essential.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse.html>>
- Consumer Project on Technology <<http://www.essential.org/cpt>>
- Taxpayer Assets Project <<http://www.tap.org>>
- Environmental Resources Information Network <<http://www.tap.org/erin/>>
- Public Citizen <<http://www.citizen.org>>
- Union for the Public Domain <<http://www.public-domain.org>>
- Freedom of Information Clearing House  
<[http://www.citizen.org/public\\_citizen/litigation/foic/foic.html](http://www.citizen.org/public_citizen/litigation/foic/foic.html)>
- Secrecy & Government Bulletin <<http://www.awpi.com/IntelWeb/US/S-GB/>>
- Archives of Info-Policy-Notes <<http://www.essential.org/listproc/info-policy-notes>>
- Archives of CPT-IP <<http://www.essential.org/listproc/ip>>
- Digital Futures Coalition <<http://www.ari.net/dfc/>>