

The Society of Your Choice

by Richard Evanoff

In the last two columns I've been talking about the government's new "Five Year Economic Plan," which has the ostensible goal of "Sharing a Better Quality of Life Around the Globe." According to an article in the November, 1992 issue of *Sumitomo Corporation News*, the plan is focusing on improvements in three key areas: "shorter working hours, home ownership, and social capital expenditure from the standpoint of the user." While shorter working hours are certainly a commendable goal, I've tried to show that the real reason why the government-corporate complex wants them is not out of benevolent concern for workers, but to cut labor costs, improve efficiency, and hence increase profit margins — leading ultimately to the same kind of downward mobility you find in advanced capitalistic countries around the globe. Similarly, the real impetus behind increasing home ownership isn't to provide a "better quality of life" for the average person, but rather to stimulate the construction, real estate, and banking industries with more nature-destroying "development" that will ultimately lead to even more overcrowded conditions and a decreasing quality of life.

This month we look at "social capital expenditure," with its enticing, and thoroughly propagandistic tag — "from the standpoint of the user." The article in *Sumitomo Corporation News* states that the government intends to expand social capital ¥430 trillion over the next ten years — the amount pledged by Japan at the Structural Impediments Initiative talks with the U.S. It's interesting to see a plan which has the ostensible purpose of increasing domestic spending linked with international trade talks. Why? Well, for years Japan's trading partners have been arguing that Japan should stimulate its domestic economy. The idea is that if Japanese corporations concentrate on producing goods for domestic consumption, they'll be producing fewer goods for export overseas, which in turn will lead to a more equal overall trade balance between Japan and other countries. If Japan fails to curb its exports to countries such as the United States voluntarily, increased protectionism will be the likely result. Because Japan's economy is presently so export-driven, not being able to sell products overseas would be devastating. Better to begin to shift now, then, to an economy which focuses more on domestic consumption rather than on overseas exports.

Whether products are made for export or for domestic consumption, however, the

underlying logic doesn't change in the least — the goal is to make as many products as possible and to sell them at as high a profit as possible. Of course, this is exactly the same goal of corporations in every capitalistic country of the world, whether it be Japan, the United States, South Korea, or Germany. Nationalism has absolutely nothing to do with it, yet for years Japanese workers have been sold on the idea that they were working so hard for the "good of their country." While corporations got stronger by dominating markets overseas, the actual quality of life for ordinary people inside Japan did not substantially improve. Sure, people had more superfluous electronic goods and gadgets, but look at the essentials: housing became less spacious and more expensive and the percentage of monthly income spent on food increased substantially. I've heard many working people in Japan complain that while Japan has a first-rate economy, it has a second-rate standard of living. (A Japanese once wrote a letter to the editor of *Time* magazine which added "third-rate politicians" to this list.) If it's any consolation, most people in advanced capitalistic countries probably feel the same way.

Will the government's Five Year Plan to "Share a Better Quality of Life Around the Globe" actually succeed in giving Japanese citizens first-rate lifestyles? Or, in the words of the plan, will Japan really be able to become a "lifestyle superpower"? It all depends, of course, on how you define a "first-rate lifestyle." It's true that many Japanese, like people in other "advanced" capitalistic countries, measure their lifestyles in terms of their material possessions, i.e., more = better. More houses, more cars, more appliances, more gadgets. The downside of course is that more of all those things also means more concrete, more garbage, more pollution, and less free time, less enjoyment of life, less nature. Moreover, the consumer lifestyles of "advanced" capitalistic countries can only be maintained by using up a disproportionate amount of the earth's resources, living in an environmentally unsustainable way, and continuing to exploit the third world. While a small minority of the earth's population comes to live in an oversaturated plastic consumer world, the majority in the rest of the world increasingly lacks the basic necessities of life: eatable food, drinkable water, and livable houses.

The fact is, however, that the "super-lifestyle" promoted by the government is unattainable. Eventually the materialistic quest for more and more will lead to both material and spiritual impoverishment. This paradox was fully evident in a headline in May 16, 1992 issue of *The Japan Times*, which read: JAPANESE GETTING RICHER, STUDY FINDS: BUT SCANT IMPROVEMENT IS SEEN IN LIFESTYLE, WORKING CONDITIONS. The article described a new index called the "People's Life Indicator" that attempted to measure

people's satisfaction in 153 different areas. The opening sentence provides a succinct summary: "People in Japan are enjoying more affluence in income, health care and education than a decade ago, but have seen little change in social life, housing and work conditions." Most of us are already aware that our social lives, housing, and work conditions haven't improved, but I wonder what exactly is meant by "more affluence in income, health care and education." Doesn't more affluence in income without a corresponding improvement in lifestyle simply mean more inflation? Doesn't more affluence in health care simply mean that we're spending more money on doctors' bills now than in the past when we lived healthier lives in cleaner environments? Doesn't more affluence in education simply mean that more money is being spent on prep schools as part of the mad, mind-numbing competition to get accepted into a "good university"?

The government's "Five Year Plan" to improve our quality of life will lead us ultimately to more of the same paradoxical conclusions. One can see the profit motive lurking behind even the best of the plan's intentions. For example, increasing "Leisure and Fulfillment in Life" will undoubtedly mean government stimulation of the leisure industries, which ultimately translates into more nature-destroying golf courses and ski resorts. Extending the retirement age from 60 to 65 falls under the category of "Increased Social Participation by Senior Citizens," but is probably primarily intended to address Japan's current labor shortage. "Relaxing regulations and conditions for economic competition" is supposed to result in a "Better Consumer Life," but it will probably mean the squeezing out of smaller businesses in favor of large transnational corporations and a relaxing of regulations we may want to keep, e.g., environmental regulations.

No wonder corporations are greeting the government's "Five Year Plan" with enthusiasm. Tax dollars will be handed over to corporations under the guise of "improving our quality of life" — with fewer regulations thrown in as an added bonus. The article in *Sumitomo Corporation News* closes with the following, quite revealing, sentence: "Any economic growth that results from such policy management will be accepted as a product of these efforts." It's doubtful whether the plan would receive much support if it didn't benefit the big corporations in a big way. My personal response is to proclaim to governments and corporations everywhere: Please stop trying to improve my quality of life with your schemes and development plans! Or at least, please stop dozing me with the bull that you're trying to improve my quality of life when in fact you're simply bull-dozing over it. □