

Taking on the Nobel Laureates

by Richard Evanoff

I hate giving this much space to a dumb argument, but considering that it was made, according to press reports, by "46 prominent U.S. scientists (including 27 Nobel laureates)" joined by "218 scientists in other countries," I'll give 'em space to make their case. The excerpts which follow are from an appeal made by this distinguished group to the heads of state at the Rio Summit:

"We want to make our full contribution to the preservation of our common heritage, the Earth. We are however worried, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, at the emergence of an irrational ideology which is opposed to scientific and industrial progress and impedes economic and social development. We contend that a natural state, sometimes idealized by movements with a tendency to look toward the past, does not exist and has probably never existed since man's first appearance in the biosphere, insofar as humanity has always progressed by increasingly harnessing Nature to its needs and not the reverse. We fully subscribe to the objective of a scientific ecology for a universe whose resources must be taken stock of, monitored and preserved. But we herewith demand that this stock-taking, monitoring and preservation be founded on scientific criteria and not on irrational pre-conceptions...

"We draw everybody's attention to the absolute necessity of helping poor countries attain a level of sustainable development which matches that of the rest of the planet, protecting them from troubles and dangers stemming from developed nations, and avoiding their entanglement in a web of unrealistic obligations which would compromise both their independence and their dignity. The greatest evils which stalk our Earth are ignorance and oppression, and not Science, Technology and Industry whose instruments, when adequately managed, are indispensable tools of a future shaped by Humanity, by itself and for itself, overcoming major problems like overpopulation, starvation and worldwide disease."

The argument basically being set forth here is that Science, Technology, and Industry (in capital letters no less) are objective, rational, and life-enhancing while any brand of environmentalism which challenges this Holy Trinity is subjective, irrational, and life-denying. But if Science, Technology, and Industry are in fact so objective, rational, and life-enhancing, why the need for this more or less blatant piece of ideological propaganda on their behalf? I am by no means opposed to authentic science, appropriate technology, and industry that is geared towards satisfying genuine human needs, but that doesn't seem

to be what these eminent scientists, with their inflated sense of self-importance and misguided humanism, are really talking about.

In the first place, authentic science is about knowledge, not values. When it does its job well, it provides us with accurate knowledge about the world. But it cannot tell us what to do with that knowledge. The ends and purposes to which this knowledge is put can only be decided by human values — and such values are intentionally bracketed out of science in its quest for "objectivity." Technology is concerned with applying knowledge gained from science in ways that are presumed to be "beneficial." But technology too ultimately cannot decide what is truly "beneficial" because this involves making value judgments that are by nature beyond the ken of mere technological application. Finally, industry, if it's also doing its job well, is concerned with satisfying the basic needs of human beings so that they can live healthy and fulfilling lives. But human values are also notably absent in our present economic system, which is governed by an impersonal market in which people with money buy goods that they may or may not really need from producers whose main interest is not really in satisfying genuine human needs but in maximizing profits. People who don't have the money to buy the goods are of no real consequence in our economic system, regardless of whatever genuine human needs they may have. We have enough food at present to feed everyone on the planet, for example, yet half the world goes to bed hungry every night simply because they don't have the money to buy it. So much, then, for the possibility of our present economic system providing us with an adequate set of values.

It's tempting to say that the problem, then, isn't with Science or Technology, but with Industry (which I'm equating here with our present global economic system in general), but that would be to ignore the cozy relationship that these three have with each other (indeed that which makes the three gods one). Technological progress is fueled not so much by a desire to genuinely improve the lives of the poor, but by the demands of Industry. Think of all the real improvements we could make in the world with the \$1 billion Japanese Industry, capital *I*, has spent over the past few years trying to develop high definition TV, as just one example. And scientific progress is fueled not so much by a desire to find genuine knowledge, but is also in the service of Industry, which either directly or through government lackeys provides much of the funding for scientific research. The knowledge that these scientists uncover may in fact be objective and value-free, but the use to which it is ultimately put is not. Government and industry are increasingly trying to direct scientific research towards projects that produce "results" and science is gradually losing whatever autonomy it once had — giving a completely different meaning to the word "objectivity." As science

becomes increasingly politicized, there will be less and less real "objectivity" and more and more ideological propaganda masking as "objectivity." Given society's present irrational — yes *irrational* — faith in Science, Technology, and Industry, it'll be harder than ever to find out what is objectively and rationally true. Just witness the arguments made by Science, Technology, and Industry in favor of nuclear power. Who's paying whom to say what, anyway?

So, we can now ask, What ideology is informing the 46 prominent U.S. (including 27 Nobel laureates) and 218 scientists in other countries? First, the *economic* ideology that the only way to help the poor is through more economic growth — what the scientists refer to as the "absolute necessity of helping poor countries attain a level of sustainable development which matches that of the rest of the planet." Just how objective and rational is it, I wonder, to believe that everyone in the world can achieve the present levels of over-consumption that the "rest of the planet" (i.e., the First World) now indulges in. To repeat a sentence from a previous ecoLogic column: "Will the earth really be able to sustain a population of 10.4 billion people in 2029 and provide each one of those persons with First-World lifestyles, complete with cars, televisions, washing machines, and refrigerators?" Rather than speak (in more scientific than scientific terms) of "absolute necessity," I'd prefer, as an ethicist, to say that we have a *moral obligation* to drastically reduce excessive consumption in the first world, to share what we have with the poor, and to create an equal and ecologically sustainable society for all. But this, of course, contradicts the economic ideology which, above all, avoids forcing the rich to share the pie and therefore can only "help the poor" by making a bigger pie (with non-renewable energy, of course, and increasingly scarce crust and filling). And don't forget that making a bigger pie also means bigger pieces for the rich — proportionately *much* bigger pieces — at least while they last.

Given the ideology of Industry as a base, it's easy to see how Technology and Science fit in. Since providing everyone on the planet with First-World lifestyles is an ecological impossibility and pursuing this goal will only lead to greater entropy, we must have faith — *irrational* faith — that the superstitions of Science and the wizardry of Technology can defy this entropy and somehow manage to bring life out of death. My guess then is that these mad scientists are bent on creating a Frankenstein monster, even though they themselves, for obvious, self-justifying reasons, must believe that what they're doing is objective, rational, and life-enhancing. Let me repeat, I am not opposed to science, technology, or industry as such, but when scientists who are professionally obliged to sus-

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pend ethical judgments from their work, suddenly become ethicists, they don't always do a good job of it. (Someone might tell them about the Second Law of Thermodynamics as well.)

Most environmentalists, as I've argued repeatedly in this column, do not want to drive humanity back to a "natural state," as these prominent scientists suggest. But there's a helluva lot of difference between genuine ecological sustainability at drastically lower levels of consumption and sham "sustainable development" which contradictorily thinks that even more economic growth can improve civilization's already dismal record on ecological sustainability. I entirely concur, however, with the scientists' contention that we should not allow ourselves to be swayed by "irrational" ideologies or preconceptions and that "the great evils which stalk our Earth are ignorance and oppression." So to them I say please spare me the irrational ideologies and preconceptions of your politicized science and economicized technology; the moral ignorance that hides behind your Nobel Prizes; and the oppression that may ultimately occur against those who refuse to bow down and worship the false gods of Science, Technology, and Industry. □

Superskyscrapers On the Rise?

With support from the Ministry of Construction, a group for the study of "hyperbuildings" recently got off to a start. Hyperbuildings are superskyscrapers as high as 1,000 meters and with floor space of 1-2 million square meters. Expected to have a useful lifetime of 1,000 years, such buildings are supposed to help "make effective use" of scarce land space in the Japanese capital.

The group — consisting of more than 90 enthusiastic companies including Shimizu Corporation, Kashima Corporation, Taisei Corporation (giant construction companies), steel makers, and electrical and heavy equipment manufacturers — plans to set up a research and development organization by 1996. Participants also intend to have the construction of hyperbuildings elevated to the status of a national project.

Group members rightly anticipate the criticism that will arise on environmental grounds (how much waste and sewage would one such building cause?), and one reason for forming the group was to find ways to deal with these problems.

In the final analysis, of course, the real reason for plans like this — and for "global

infrastructure" projects like desert lakes and a Second Panama Canal — are to keep the construction companies in projects. Building giant beehives for people will only create more problems, not solve anything. Instead of such fatuous and damaging "solutions" for housing, employment, and land-use problems, the world needs population reduction, and technologies that are relatively simple, small-scale, and human-sized. □

Video

Paper Trail: The Life and Times of a Woodchip

JATAN, the Japan Tropical Forest Action Network, is offering copies of the Japanese-language version of this 38-minute video (*Mori wa doko e iku: ôsutoraria no genseirin ga nihon no kami ni naru made*) for only ¥5,000 a copy. Call JATAN to order or to get more information.

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Japan's current total
fertility rate: 1.46