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Belling Behemoths
A Book Review of
PRIVILEGED GOODS: COMMODITIZATION AND ITS IMPACTS ON ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY

George Francis

The single global economy in a world of nation-states has been developing for centuries, obviously far longer than the recent political and corporate hype about globalization and its historical necessity. The global economy is both highly integrated in all key sectors and highly differentiated in the division of labor among the core of leading edge production, finance, trade and commerce and various linkages to peripheries that are exploited as sources for lower technology production, cheap labor and raw materials. This economy is overwhelmingly capitalist, meaning that goods and services are produced for sale and profit rather than for use by their producers as in "traditional" economies. Corporations are the organizational agents of choice, considerably developed, refined, and internationalized over the centuries to serve the singular purpose of enriching their owners. The system is driven by "grow or die" positive feedback processes for the unceasing accumulation of wealth, devoid of any concept of "enoughness" at the corporate and especially the system level. A major defining feature of corporate capitalism is the extent to which commodification of goods and services for sale has extended throughout the world while also penetrating deeply into all areas of community and personal lives, especially in "developed" countries.

The material benefits are impressive for those who can afford them, as the relentless corporate advertising so conspicuously portrays. But global corporate capitalism comes at an enormous cost. Jack Manno explores and explains this in considerable detail. He focuses on the processes of commoditization (rather than on their agents), noting the particular conditions that facilitate

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1 JACk P. Manno, PRIVILEGED GOODS: COMMODITIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY (Lewis Publishers 1999).

2 Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Department of Environment and Resources Studies, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.
commodification of goods and services including standardization of design for mass production, the mobility or ease of transport, and the ability to privatize ownership and hence, the profits from sales. All the incentives under corporate capitalism are to capture as much of the economy as possible through commodification processes. From this point of view, corporations have unquestionably been extremely successful.

What is lost, however, are the pre-requisites for sustainable societies. These need to nurture systems to provide for human needs under conditions of careful adaptations to the social and ecological particularities of place. Commodification of products at the expense of systems in which they are embedded also undermines or destroys “social capital” and “natural capital” (the preferred economic jargon) upon which their very profitability depends. To restore some balance, more attention needs to be given to building up non-commodified ways of providing for human needs along with strategies for need or desire-reduction. This is the recurring theme of the book.

To build a case for this, Manno provides a critique from several different perspectives, drawing upon a wealth of examples, and data from a number of sources. Each perspective will likely be familiar to some readers, but altogether they lead to a more convincing case. For example, the wasteful use of energy and resources has long been decried by environmentalists. The distortions of development that super-enriches the few while failing to meet the basic needs of all, have been viewed by others as among the “market failures” or as an inherent feature of capitalism. The systemic oppression of social classes, women and aboriginal groups, has been addressed by an array of critics of either industrialism or capitalism. The historical continuity of corporate capitalism and its commodification practices has been depicted by some historians as a somewhat more benign although pervasive extension of earlier eras of European imperial conquests and looting of resources, and the unfolding and self-legitimization of all this in the North American context has also been well documented. Manno’s approach quite forcefully reframes issues -- so often addressed in isolation as matters of technical refinements, more data, a quest for personal ethics, or
more environmental education -- by placing them firmly into their much larger economic and political contexts.

Manno also brings perspectives from general systems thinking and from more recent understanding of ecosystem dynamics which these other perspectives usually lack. Pursuit of economic efficiency at the level of individual products and services is at the expense of system-level efficiencies, but societal and ecological issues have become pervasive at the system-levels. Manno urges investment in "noncommodity system elements such as those related to community infrastructure, governance capacity, mutual aid, and community self-reliance"\textsuperscript{3} to help assure system maintenance and the requisite variety required for stability and resilience to adapt to external change. Drawing upon ecology as a "metadiscipline", Manno calls for systems principles to serve as the allocation principles for investments of time, energy, and money to counter the excessive commodification driven by market-based decisions that are oblivious to their system-wide consequences.

So, what to do? The first step "must be the emergence of a powerful social movement able to extract government from its capture by the forces of economic power,"\textsuperscript{4} and this in turn "...will require a major new political movement to assert the values of caring and connection distinct from the values of commerce."\textsuperscript{5} This movement could have a number of potential supporters from among all those disadvantaged, marginalized, or immiserated by corporate capitalism. One other requirement is a decommodification strategy implemented through dematerialization for greater technical efficiencies, and viewed as a new industrial revolution. This is already underway, perhaps more so in Europe than in North America. But the main requirement, which would appear much more problematic, is "for the public to gain or regain control over the institutions for governance and for those institutions to have the capacity to obtain and direct resources towards public goods with

\textsuperscript{3} Manno, supra note 1, at 71.
\textsuperscript{4} Id. at 210.
\textsuperscript{5} Id. at 233.
little or no commodity potential.” This will require the severance of alliances between business and governments at all levels, including global trade and finance regimes.

Manno's case against the excesses of a commodified economy is wide-ranging and strongly argued. However, his focus on commodification processes and consequences tends to obscure the question of human agency to the point that one is reminded of other discussions about “technology” or “markets” portrayed as reified abstractions operating alone in their own world. Corporations and the capitalist system are mentioned, but the discussions rely more on general comments about “the economy” or simply the “we” that equally implicates us all. While there is a brief mention in the final chapter about the need for reforms in corporate law, it seems to downplay the fact that “belling” the corporate behemoths that drive the whole system to serve their never-ending self-enrichment will be another formidable political struggle. Yet surely a major component of the strategy for survival and sustainability is to take back control over corporations to redefine the basis for their legitimacy, liability and accountability in society.

The systems perspective allows for one other observation. Systems with strong internal positive feedbacks running for long periods of time are subject to sudden collapse without notice. The balance called for by Manno might serve to save capitalism temporarily from itself, as a kind of new deal, or provide the basis for human survival as the old system goes down as suddenly, thoroughly, and unpredictably as did the former Soviet Union a decade ago. The delusionary triumphalism in so much of the corporate media is hardly reassuring in this matter.

6 Id. at 235.