

## ***SINS BY THE NUMBERS***

**By Michael Ventura**

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Some numbers: Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world (after China, India, and the United States). Thirty-five thousand troops were in the streets of its capital, Jakarta, this morning (February 12). They were prepared to take severe measures if the food riots that have erupted in many villages should spread to the cities. What's that to you? The Asian financial crisis has hit Indonesia hard. Despite the International Monetary Fund's efforts, Indonesia's currency is worthless. Because of "austerity measures" demanded by the West as the price of aid, millions have been laid off and are facing the specter of hunger. So: food riots. If Indonesia "destabilizes" - dissolves in chaos - the mostly Asian banks that loaned Indonesia huge sums for development will have to write off those loans. That would be big trouble. The fear is that a chain reaction of Asian economies going under would ultimately affect Japan, the world's second-largest economy. Japan's banks are notoriously shaky right now, *and* they're heavily involved in American investments of all kinds. A crisis in Japan would hit American bonds and stocks, and good-bye to good times. So if those 35,000 Jakarta troops are unduly harsh to hungry people, we won't complain. More numbers: Stock holdings now constitute an amazing 28% of American household wealth. So, among our middle class, almost one dollar in three is tied up in stocks. Put it another way: For a middle-class family, one dollar in three has been transferred to the control of an impersonal system run by a tiny elite. Another 11% is in bonds; 27% is in real estate. Only 8% of our average household income, less than one dollar in 10, is accessible as cash or savings. This means that most Americans have direct control of less than one in 10 of the dollars they count as their own.

One reason the stock market has posted gains at a surreal rate during the last several years is this: American-based corporations have amassed huge profits, in part, by exploiting cheap labor in the Third World, principally Asia. In effect, the American middle class is now living off the labor of people getting meager wages in working conditions that most Americans would consider intolerable. Thus the new American prosperity is now based, to a significant extent, on a corporate form of slavery.

We do not want to know this, because the moral implications are brutal. What kind of people are we, if we can accept prosperity on these terms? The answer is: not the kind of people we say we are. Not even a little bit.

*If* a major country like Indonesia destabilizes, as is all too possible (governments do not send 35,000 armed men against their own people unless they absolutely must); and *if* that causes a financial domino effect in Asia, as many economists fear; then our new investment in slavery (for that's what it is) may, temporarily at least, be inaccessible to American business. Then the American middle class would suffer the consequences of their hypocrisy - and of the rash act of allowing people they don't know, and over whom they have no control, to manipulate one-third of their income.

As a people, we've always been good at keeping our hands clean - or rather, at keeping the appearance of clean hands. *We're* not slavers, we're just playing the market. Anyway, corporate slavery is *good* for those people! They were dirt-poor to begin with,

right? Laboring for us, they upped their standard of living, didn't they? At the moment, this rap would be a hard sell to the food-rioters of Indonesia.

Our corporate-controlled news outlets call them "rioters" because this will make it more acceptable if those 35,000 soldiers start shooting. Calling them "rioters" is easier than calling them "hungry." That's our labor-pool, after all, and we don't want to think of them as hungry. They lost their jobs in order to protect *our* bottom line. Then they were shipped from the cities, where the factories are, back to their villages, where there's no money and little food. Thus they could go hungry out of sight of the world. Out of sight, that is, of us. That way *we* don't start asking the wrong questions. Questions about *our* money, i.e., about ourselves.

I think of what Thomas Pynchon said in *Gravity's Rainbow*: "If you can get people asking the wrong questions, then you don't have to worry about the answers." But it's not quite that simple. It's easy to get us asking the wrong questions when we don't want to know the answers.

And I think of what James Baldwin wrote in *No Name in the Street*:

"For a very long time... America [has] prospered - or seemed to prosper: This prosperity cost millions of people their lives. Now, not even the people who are the most spectacular recipients of the benefits of this prosperity are able to endure these benefits: They can neither understand them nor do without them, nor can they go beyond them. Above all, they cannot, or dare not, assess or imagine the price paid by their victims.... In order to preserve [their] values, however stifling and joyless these values have caused their lives to be, the bulk of the people desperately seek out representatives who are prepared to make up in cruelty what both they and the people lack in conviction."

These representatives are not only our elected officials. They are also our CEOs, our bankers, our free-marketeers, our media - anyone who, at any time, *and in our name*, has used the concept of "the bottom line" to justify the suffering of people who, after all, must work; must take any job available to feed themselves and their families. When we invest in stocks that obey the cruel law of "the bottom line" we are, in effect, electing representatives to commit our cruelties for us. But this does not wash the stain of suffering from our profits. Nor does it make us, in our comfortable and seemingly safe living rooms, any less culpable.

That food riot in Indonesia is *our* riot, baby. It's not the first but, God help us, it could lead one day to the last. And there is nothing we fear more than The Last Riot, the riot that charges through our doors and demands of us what we have demanded of others. If and when that happens, all the "nice" people will raise their clean hands to the skies and, in outraged voices, cry, "Why me? I did nothing wrong!" No, you just elected, through your use of money, others to do your wrongs for you, far from your sight.

Americans secretly know the truth of this. That's why the pharmaceutical industries get so rich. No people in history have had such upset stomachs, such raw nerves, such trouble sleeping. No people in history have been in such desperate need of distraction, gorging on pap TV, pap music, pap movies, pap "news," in order not to see who they really are. No people in history have watched so many actors portray who they really *aren't*. It is clear that we can't stand ourselves. Why else would we require so much distraction? We can't bear our own silence, our own company, or the company of each other. And maybe, just maybe, this has something to do with how ugly, how morally bereft, is our behavior with anything that concerns money.

Which brings up another number:

Since the Monica Lewinsky scale broke last month, President Clinton's job-approval rating has jumped to 68%. At first, Americans were appalled, dismayed, and on the verge of being infuriated. Then, quite suddenly, as a herd, we decided it would be better not to know. "He's doing a good job with the economy, who cares who sucks him off?" Some have called this a sign of maturity: Americans are now more interested in practicalities than in the intimate lives of our leaders. But no one who channel-surfs at any hour, day or night, could conceivably come to the conclusion that we're mature. Nor could anyone who listens to (most of) our music, or logs onto our computer chat lines, or listens to talk radio. There is not much evidence of maturity out there.

As a nation we've decided (57% of us, anyway) that we don't want to look too closely at Bill Clinton because we don't want to look too closely at anything. First, this latest scandal was titillating. Then, because to look hard at Clinton might mean looking harder at ourselves, the scandal became threatening. After all, for many, the money is pretty good these days. And it clearly doesn't matter how we get it, as long as the stains on our hands remain invisible. To question Clinton's morals too closely might mean we'd have to question our own. Like him, we're well-versed in lying. We lie a lot, mostly to ourselves, and (like Clinton) mostly about money and sex. A country, an economy, that exists on lies, needs a liar as its figurehead. In this sense, Clinton *is* a lie. Our lie. As Bush was. As Reagan was. The whole morally warped lying bunch. If we don't allow them to lie to us, and about us, it would be harder to lie to ourselves. Harder, for instance, to avoid facing that our economy is now based on a new system of economic slavery. So we've sent the message that we're willing to tolerate Clinton's lies.

More than that, we require his lies. We require many lies. Without them, we would have to admit that we have forsaken justice for comfort. Forsaken intimacy for distraction. Forsaken every precept of Christianity - and of any other religion - for profit. Forsaken who we are, and who we might have become, for the right to hide behind our lies.

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