

THE CATCH OF ALL CATCHES

By Michael Ventura

December 4, 1992

Where were we? Let's see... a backward, filthy and savage place called Europe was (with the aid of Chinese gunpowder, Middle Eastern metallurgy and Mediterranean seafaring) in the process of sacking the Americas. The Europeans were aided by a belief system called Christianity, which sanctioned the slaughter of anyone who didn't agree with it. First in the Americas, then in Africa and Asia, these Europeans killed and enslaved tens of millions in order to steal their natural resources, and wherever they went they disrupted millennia of self-correcting harmony between people and nature. They justified these activities by calling themselves "civilized". As proof of this civilized state, they showed off some paintings, some music, some gadgets and some books – as though the existence of such things somehow excused the decimation of whole peoples.

On a river of blood, the world's wealth flowed into Europe.

A tiny island like England could become a major power in the strength of what it stole (which is what the word "empire" describes). European pillage codified the Renaissance, the growth of nationalism, the rise of the merchant and "middle" classes – everything, in fact, that we think of as more or less modern. Europeans at all levels were steadily more prosperous, more mobile, more literate and more free – in direct proportion to the suffering Europe inflicted on the rest of the world.

But there was a catch. Two catches, actually.

Catch No. 1 was that disrupting other peoples disrupted the Europeans themselves. Some change was benign: tomatoes (native to Brazil) combined with noodles (an invention of China) became Italian food. Some were not so benign: potatoes, which came from Peru, changed the agriculture of Ireland and Russia (yes, the Russians had no vodka before Peru's potatoes); as would later happen in what would be called "the Third World," Russian and Irish peasants who had been flexible, raising many crops, were now forced to grow and be dependent upon only one. When the potato crop failed in Ireland, for instance, tens of thousands starved or emigrated. More profoundly, the new wealth triggered social changes that could only be sustained by the infusion of still more wealth. (This is still true in the West – a process now called "growth".) Even with the advent of technology in the 1800s, Europe could not supply that wealth on its own. It had to keep sacking.

Catch No. 2: Europe couldn't change fast enough culturally to accommodate its economic changes. What would now be called the new "input" put enormous strains on Europe's social fabric and belief systems, creating tensions, factions and fissures, which many found unendurable. Unlike during the Dark Ages, now Europeans had somewhere to go, so they started going – and many of them ended up here. In this way, Europe gradually metastasized into something called the United States of America.

You cannot understand the world today unless you understand that no Europeans emigrated to America because they were happy and contented in Europe. Content people don't leave the ground of their ancestors. They came here because they despaired of Europe. However much they might indulge their sentimentality once they got here, waxing ethnic over Ireland, Sicily, Germany, France, wherever – they came because they were persecuted, out of work, out of food, out of hope or just plain fed up. They came

because their heritage, had failed them. *Everyone* came here because of that. So much for “Western Civilization.”

Europe and its offspring North America took to disrupting the Third World so thoroughly that *they* came too – and for the same basic reason: heritage failure. The Africans, who were dragged here, and today’s Mexicans, who rush here, are in one way the same: their heritage did not protect them from the West.

Thus an unutterably deep and never-spoken sense of failure infects America: the failure of where we all came from, every single place we came from – places our peoples would never have left unless those places had, in some way, failed and betrayed them. Our manic need to succeed in the United States is the result of a universal, worldwide failure.

Ah, but there was still another catch...call it: the Catch of All Time. Remember that before the invasions of the West there was no out-of-control overpopulation in the Americas, Africa and much of the rest of the world, and, virtually everywhere in the world, humans coexisted with animals and plants. But Europe and then North America tried to use Latin America, Africa and Asia as a breeding ground for resources. African peoples, for instance, were driven off their ancestral lands so that those areas could be mined or farmed in ways profitable to the West. Natural balances everywhere were destroyed for a crop or an ore – and the people were virtually discarded, driven into shantytowns or made dependent not, as they had been, on the give-and-take of nature, but on their trade balance with Europe and North America. Many lands that had never known poverty were now plunged into unspeakable misery.

It was at his time that humanity learned something about itself that it had never needed to know before: deprived populations *always* overpopulate. Populations with sufficient necessities *never* overpopulate. The imbalance leading to our present overpopulation was caused solely by Western greed.

Then humanity learned something else: what we call “wildlife” (though it is never as destructive as human beings) needs a lot of room. The children born as you have read this article – given that they live 60-odd years, when they die there will be no tigers, no rhinos, no elephants, no jaguars, no giraffes, no wild. Not because of hunting, but because of what’s called “habitat encroachment.” Swelling human populations taking up all available space. In Africa alone, the population is expected to increase by 40% in the next eight years. Goodbye to the cheetah, the antelope. And what unimaginably grotesque poverty will those 40 percent have to call “life”?

Meanwhile, in the United States and Europe – which have roughly 20 percent of the world’s population but use (figures vary) roughly 80 percent of the world’s resources ... you and I are murderers. We’re killing the animals. We’re killing the people. We murder by maintaining our standard of living – that 80 percent figure. And we all know that we’re not going to sacrifice our standard of living, no matter what. In fact, we seek to increase it. Or at least hold onto it. And what’s called “politics” in this country and in this newspaper, is a family argument about how to hold on to that standard. With subarguments about “issues” like whether resource-gorging men should exchange power with resource-gorging women. What a stupid, shameful spectacle.

I would like to suggest that the price of our civilization is a bit exorbitant. And to say quietly and (believe me, I know) ineffectually: civilization is a form of mass murder.

Yes, dear reader, you and I are the murderers. That is *our* heritage. No matter how pretty our beliefs.

ADDENDUM: When I discuss these topics with friends, I often get a queasy response that goes something like, “Well, uh, yeah, uh, there *has* to be more population control.” They invariably mean controlling somebody else’s population. To answer, let me end this piece with a couple of quotes. First, Fred Pearce in *New Scientist*, summarizing a report from the Center for Science and the Environment in New Delhi:

Why is it that Western environmentalists worry so much about population growth in poor countries when each new child born in North America or Europe will consume 10 or 100 times the world’s resources and contribute many times as much pollution? A three-child American family is, in logic, many more times as dangerous to the planet as an eight- (or even an eighty-) child African family.

And this, more to the point perhaps, from James Baldwin:

The wretched of the Earth do not decide to become extinct, they resolve, on the contrary, to multiply: life is their only weapon against life, life is all that they have. This is why the dispossessed and starving will never be convinced (though some may be coerced) by the population-control programs of the civilized ... The civilized have created the wretched, quite coldly and deliberately, and do not intend to change the status quo; are responsible for their slaughter and enslavement; rain down bombs on defenseless children whenever and wherever they decide that their “vital interests” are menaced ... these people are not to be taken seriously when they speak of the “sanctity” of human life, or the “conscience” of the civilized world. There is a “sanctity” involved with bringing a child into the world: it is better than bombing one out of it. Dreadful indeed it is to see a starving child, but the answer to that is not to prevent the child’s arrival but to restructure the world so that the child can live in it: so that the “vital interest” of the world becomes nothing less than the life of the child ... The children of the despised and rejected are menaced from the moment they stir in the womb, and are therefore sacred in a way that the children of the saved are not. And the children know it, which is how they manage to raise their children, and why they will not be persuaded – by their children’s murderers after all – to cease having children.

The same liberal Americans who oppose “trickle-down economics” for their own people advocate, by their grip on the present standard of living, a de facto fatal trickle-down economics for the Third World. These people, as Baldwin would say, are not to be taken seriously.

And where do you go, knowing you profit from a monstrous crime – even as I do, in the crying out against that crime? This is the hardest thing I’ve ever written: there’s nowhere to go, the crime is everywhere now, there’s no possibility but to fight your fight, play out your hand, and hope you can salvage just enough decency to stand before God without being annihilated by shame.

