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TO BE LIKE THEM

Eduardo Galeano

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EDUARDO GALEANO originates from Montevideo, Uruguay. A journalist on the well-known weekly, *Marcha*, he had to go into exile to Argentina, then to Spain, during the military dictatorship (1973–85). His best-known book is *The Open Veins of Latin America* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1973). Among subsequently published works is a passionate review of the continent's tragic history, *Memory Of Fire* (trans. Cedric Belfrage, Pantheon Books, New York and Methuen, London, 1985–88; originally published 1982–86 by Siglo XXI, Madrid). In January 1992 Messidor published a collection of his essays under the title *Contempt: The Destiny Of Latin America*.

It was the promise of the politicians, the justification of the technocrats, the illusion of the outcast. The Third World will become like the First World – rich, cultivated and happy if it behaves and does what it is told, without saying anything or complaining. A prosperous future will compensate for the good behaviour of those who died of hunger during the last chapter of the televised serial of history. WE CAN BE LIKE THEM, proclaimed a gigantic illuminated board along the highway to development of the underdeveloped and the modernization of the latecomers.

But, 'what can't be, can't be, and more than that is impossible', as Pedro el Gallo, the bullfighter so rightly said. If the poor countries reached the levels of production and waste of the rich countries, our planet would die. Already it is in a coma, seriously contaminated by the industrial civilization and emptied of its last drop of substance by the consumer society.

IMPOSSIBLE HOPES

During the last twenty years, while the human race increased threefold, erosion has destroyed the equivalent of the whole cultivable area of the United States. The world, which has become a market for merchandise, loses 15

million hectares of forest a year, of which 6 million become desert. Humiliated nature has been made over to the service of capital accumulation. Soil, water and air are being poisoned so that money produces ever more money, without a fall in the rate of profit. He who makes the most money in the shortest time is the efficient one.

Acid rain from industrial fumes is killing the woods and lakes of the world, while toxic wastes are poisoning the rivers and seas. In the South, imported agro-business prospers, uprooting trees and human beings. In the North and the South, the East and the West, man is sawing off the branch on which he is sitting with feverish enthusiasm.

From woodland to desert: modernization, devastation. The continuous Amazonian bonfire burns an area half the size of Belgium each year on behalf of the civilization of greed, and all over Latin America land is being cleared and becoming arid. *Each minute*, in Latin America, 23 hectares of wood are being sacrificed, most of them by companies who produce meat or wood on a large scale for foreign consumption. The cows of Costa Rica become MacDonald hamburgers in the USA. Half a century ago, trees covered three-quarters of this little country; there are very few left now and, at the end of this century, at the current rate of deforestation, Costa Rica will be completely bare. This country exports meat to the United States and imports from it pesticides that the US bans on its own soil.

A small number of countries are squandering the resources that belong to everyone. The crime and madness of the wasteful society: 6 per cent of the richest populations are devouring one-third of the total energy available and one-third of all the world's natural resources in use. According to the statistics, one average North American consumes as much as fifty Haitians. Obviously these averages do not apply to someone from Harlem or to Baby Doc Duvalier, but it is important to ask: what would happen if the fifty Haitians suddenly consumed as much as fifty North Americans? What would happen if the huge populations of the South could devour the world with the unpunished voracity of the North? What would happen if the luxury articles, cars, refrigerators, television sets, nuclear and electric power stations increased at this crazy pace? All the world's oil would be burnt up in ten years.

And what would happen to the climate which, with the warming of the atmosphere, is already close to catastrophe? What would happen to the soil – the little that erosion spared us? And to the water which, contaminated by nitrates, pesticides and industrial wastes of mercury and lead, is being drunk by one-quarter of humanity? What would happen? Nothing would be left. We would have to change planets. Our own, already so exploited, could no longer stand it.

The precarious equilibrium of the world, which is poised on the brink of an abyss, depends on the perpetuation of injustice. The deprivation of the majority is necessary so that the waste of a few is possible. In order that a few may consume still more, many must continue to consume still less. And

so that everyone stays in their place, the system increases its military weapons. Incapable of fighting poverty, it fights the poor, while the dominant culture, a militarized culture, worships the violence of power.

The American way of life, based on the privilege of waste, can only be practised by the dominant minorities of the dominating countries. If it were generalized, it would mean the collective suicide of humanity. It is therefore impossible – but is it even desirable?

In a well-organized ant colony, there are a few queen ants and innumerable worker ants. The queens are born with wings and can procreate. The workers, who do not fly or procreate, work for the queens; the police ants watch over the workers, but also the queens.

'Life is something that happens when one is busy doing something else', remarked John Lennon. In our era, in which ways and means are so often confused, we do not work to live; we live to work. Some work all the time so that they can satisfy their needs. And others work more and more in order to waste.

An eight-hour work day in Latin America is pure fiction. Though it is seldom acknowledged by the official statistics, two jobs are the reality for a mass of people who have no other way of keeping hunger at bay. But, where development is at its apogee, is it normal that people work like ants? Does wealth lead to liberty, or does it increase the fear of freedom?

THE ABERRATIONS OF MODERNITY

To be is to have, says the system. And the problem is that those who have the most want still more; and that, when all is said and done, people end up by belonging to things and working under their orders. The model of life in the consumer society, which these days is imposed as a model at the universal level, converts time into an economic resource which is increasingly rare and expensive. Time is sold and hired. But who is the master of time? The car, the television set, the video, the personal computer, the portable telephone and other pass-cards to happiness, which were developed to 'save time' or to 'pass the time', have actually taken time over. The car, for example, not only occupies urban space, but also human time. In theory the car serves to economize time, but in practice it devours it. A considerable proportion of work time goes to pay the transport for getting to work, which takes more and more time because of the traffic jams in these modern Babylons.

There is no need to be an economic expert. Good common sense is enough to see that technological progress, by increasing productivity, reduces working time. Good common sense, however, did not foresee the fear that 'free time' could bring, or the trap of consumption, or the manipulating power of publicity. In Japanese cities they have been working forty-seven hours a week for the last twenty years, while in Europe the number of work hours has been reduced, but very slowly, at a rhythm that has nothing to do

with the accelerated development of productivity. In the automated factory there are ten workers where there used to be a thousand. But technological progress leads to unemployment instead of increasing the spaces of freedom. Freedom to squander one's time: the consumer society does not allow such waste. One's very holidays, organized by agencies which industrialize tourism, have become an exhausting activity. Killing time: modern beaches reproduce the dizziness of everyday life in the urban ant colonies.

Anthropologists teach us that our palaeolithic ancestors did not work more than twenty hours a week. Newspapers inform us that at the end of 1988 a referendum was organized in Switzerland proposing to reduce the working week to forty hours – a reduction of hours without loss of salary. The Swiss voted against it.

Ants communicate among themselves by touching their antennae. The television antennae communicate with the power centres of the contemporary world. The small screen encourages the thirst for possession in us, the frenzy to consume, the exacerbation of competition and avidity for success, in the same way that Christopher Columbus offered glass to the Indians. What the publicity does not say, however, is that the USA consumes, according to the World Health Organization, 'almost half the tranquillizers that are sold in the world'. During the last twenty years, the work day has increased in the USA. During this same period, the number of people affected by stress has doubled.

'A peasant is worth less than a cow and more than a chicken', I heard in Caaguazu, in Paraguay. And in north-east Brazil: 'He who plants has no land and he who has no land, plants.'

TOWNS AS GAS CHAMBERS

The countryside is being deserted; the Latin American towns are becoming hells the size of countries. Mexico City is growing at the rate of half a million people and 30 square kilometres *a year*. It already has a population five times that of Norway. Soon, at the end of the century, the capital of Mexico and the Brazilian city of São Paulo will be the biggest cities in the world.

The great cities of the South of the planet are like the great cities of the North, but seen through a distorting mirror. The Latin American capitals have no bicycle alleys, or filters for toxic gases. Pure air and silence are such rare and expensive commodities that there is no one left who is rich enough to buy them.

The Brazilian plants of Volkswagen and Ford make cars with filters and export them to Europe and to the USA and cars without filters to sell in Brazil. Argentina produces leadless petrol for export. For its internal market, though, it produces poisoned petrol. In all Latin America cars are allowed to spit out lead copiously from their exhaust pipes. From the car point of view, lead raises the octane level and increases the rate of profit. From the human

The Shame of a Nation

In the year nineteen hundred and sixty-four, in the richest nation of the world, six hundred people in NY and four hundred in Washington DC – half of them under ten – were bitten by rats in slum tenements; a family of twelve in the nation's capital, unable to find a low-rent house that would accept nine children, lived – and spent Christmas – in a basement furnace room.

Philip M. Stern, and George de Vincent, *The Shame of A Nation*, Ivan Obolensky, New York, 1965.

point of view, lead damages the brain and the nervous system. The cars, masters of the cities, do not listen to the troublemakers.

Year 2000, picture of the future: people with oxygen masks, birds that cough instead of sing, trees that refuse to grow. In Mexico City today you can see appeals to 'Leave the walls alone' and requests, 'Don't bang the door please'. One can't yet read 'You are advised not to come in'. How soon will there be advice on public health? Each day cars generously spew 11,000 tonnes of poisonous petrol fumes into the atmosphere. Thick fog fills the air and children are born with lead in their blood. Dead birds fall like rain on to the city which, only fifty years ago, was 'the place that had the cleanest air'. Now the cocktail of carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide has reached three times the tolerance level for human beings. What will the threshold of tolerance be for urban inhabitants?

Five million cars: the city of São Paulo has been likened to an old man suffering from a heart attack. A cloud of gaseous fumes spreads over it. From the surrounding countryside you can only see the most developed city of Brazil on Sundays. Each day, along the avenues in the centre, lighted panels keep the inhabitants informed of the situation. In 1986 the meteorological stations showed that the air was polluted, or very polluted, for 323 days in the year.

In June 1989, on days without wind or rain, Santiago, Chile, was competing with São Paulo for the title of the world's most polluted city. Mount San Cristóbal, in the very centre of town, could not be seen at all, it was so hidden by smog. The brand new democratic government of Chile took some half-hearted measures against the 800 tonnes of gas fumes that were being expelled into the city's atmosphere. Car drivers and businesses then howled that these restrictions violated freedom of enterprise and constituted an attack on human rights. The freedom of money, which distrusts all other freedoms, suffered no restrictions during the dictatorship of General Pinochet and contributed considerably to the general pollution. The right to contaminate is a basic attraction for foreign investment, almost as important as the right to pay minuscule wages. General Pinochet, in fact, never denied the right of Chileans to breathe shit.

The consumer society which consumes everyone obliges people to consume, while television gives courses in violence both to the educated and to the illiterate. Those who have nothing may live far away from those who have everything, but every day they can spy on them on the box. Television provides the obscene spectacle of an orgy of consumption and, at the same time, teaches people the art of shooting their way out.

Reality copies television: violence on the streets is another way of extending what is projected on the screens. Street children take the initiative without criminal intent: it is the only place where they can express themselves. Their only human rights are the rights to steal and to die. Little animals, left to their fate, go hunting. At the first bend in the street, they sharpen their claws and run. Life is soon over for them, worn out by glue-sniffing and other drugs to forget hunger, cold and loneliness. Life can also end suddenly, with a bullet.

THE TOWN AS PRISON

To walk in the streets in the big Latin American cities becomes a high-risk activity. To stay at home, too. The town as prison: those who are not prisoners of need are prisoners of fear. Those who have something, however little, feel threatened, in constant fear of the next attack. Those who have a lot live shut up in security fortresses. The big buildings, the residential estates, are the feudal castles of the electronic age. They only lack moats full of crocodiles. Although they do not have the majestic beauty of the castles of the Middle Ages, they *do* have the huge drawbridges, high walls, the keeps and armed guards.

The state, which is no longer paternalistic but a police state, does not practise charity. That happened in a past that is over and done with: the age of rhetoric, in which those who had gone astray were domesticated by the virtues of study and work. Now that the market economy has become dominant, the army of the outcast are eliminated through starvation and bullets. The children on the street, children of the marginal workforce, are not and cannot be useful to society. Education belongs to those who can pay: repression is used against those who cannot buy it.

According to the *New York Times*, the police have killed more than forty children in the streets of Guatemala City. They are beggar children, petty thieves, rubbish pickers, whose bodies have been found without tongues, without eyes, without ears, and thrown into the garbage. In 1989, according to Amnesty International, 457 children and adolescents were executed in the cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Recife. These crimes, committed by the death squads and other paramilitary forces, were not perpetrated in backward rural areas but in the largest cities of Brazil. They have not been committed where capitalism is lacking, but where there is too much of it. Social injustice and contempt for life increase with economic development.

Earning Certificates of Inferiority

Indians in Oaxaca who formerly had no access to schools are now drafted into school to 'earn' certificates that measure precisely their inferiority relative to the urban population. Furthermore – and this is again the rub – without this piece of paper they can no longer enter even the building trades. Modernization of 'needs' always adds new discrimination to poverty.

Ivan Illich, *Toward A History of Needs*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1977, p. 12.

In countries where the death penalty does not exist, it is applied every day to defend property rights, while every day the opinion-makers find excuses for crime. In mid-1990, in the city of Buenos Aires, an engineer shot and killed two young thieves who were escaping after having stolen the cassette player in his car. Bernardo Neustadt, the most influential Argentinian journalist, made the following statement on television: 'I would have done the same thing.' Afanasio Jazadji won a seat as deputy for the state of São Paulo. He had one of the most comfortable majorities in the history of Brazil and has become immensely popular on the radio. His programme loudly defended the death squads, advocating torture and the elimination of delinquents.

In the civilization of unrestrained capitalism, the right to property is more important than the right to life. People are worth less than things. In this context, the laws of immunity are revealing: they absolve the state terrorism exercised by the military dictatorships in the three countries of the Southern Cone, and pardon crime and terrorism, but do not pardon attacks on property rights (Chile: Decree No. 2191 in 1978; Uruguay: Law No. 15,848 in 1986; Argentina: Law No. 23,521 in 1987).

AND HOW'S THE DOLLAR DOING?

February 1989, Caracas. The price of transport suddenly goes up, the price of bread triples and the wrath of the population explodes. Three hundred, five hundred – who knows how many dead people are lying in the streets?

February 1991, Lima. The cholera epidemic hits the Peruvian coast, rages in the port of Chimbote and in the wretched shantytowns round the capital, killing a hundred people in a few days. In the hospitals there is neither serum nor salt. Rigorous economic policy has dismantled the little that remained of public health services and has doubled in no time the number of Peruvians living in acute poverty, who earn less than the minimum wage, which is \$45 a month.

The wars of today, the electronic wars, take place on the screens of the

video games. The victims are neither seen nor heard. The laboratory economy neither sees nor hears those who are hungry or the earth that has been devastated. Telecommanded weapons kill without remorse. The international technocracy, which imposes its development programmes and its structural adjustment plans on the Third World, also kills from the outside and from far away.

Over a quarter of a century ago Latin America started to dismantle the fragile barriers that had been constructed to oppose the all-powerful influence of money. Bank creditors bombarded these barrages with infallible extortion measures, while the military or the politicians in power helped to destroy them, dynamiting them from within. Thus fell, one by one, the protection barriers put up by the state in previous periods. And today the state is selling its public enterprises for next to nothing or less than nothing, as they are being bought up by those who are selling them. Our countries deliver the keys and all the rest to the international monopolies, known as 'factors that determine the prices' and turn themselves into free markets. The international technocracy, which teaches us how to make injections in wooden legs, says that the free market is the talisman of wealth. But why, then, is it not practised by the rich countries, those who are recommending it? The free market, which humiliates the weak, is the most successful export product of the powerful. It has been constructed for the use of the poor countries: no rich country has ever practised it.

Talisman of wealth, for how many? Here are official statistics from Uruguay and Costa Rica, countries where once social conflict used to be less violent: one Uruguayan in six lives in a state of extreme poverty, while two families out of five in Costa Rica are poor.

The dubious marriage of supply and demand, in a free market which hits the poor and serves the despotism of the powerful, gives rise to a speculative economy. Production is discouraged, work is despised, consumption deified. Stock-exchange boards are gazed at as if they were cinema screens and people talk about the dollar as though it were a human being.

THE 'SOCIAL COST' OF PROGRESS

Tragedy repeats itself as farce. In the era of Christopher Columbus, the development of foreign capital was experienced by Latin America as its own tragedy. Now everything has started again – as farce. It is the caricature of development: a dwarf pretending to be a child.

Technocracy sees statistics, not people. But it only sees the statistics that it wants to see. At the end of this long quarter of a century, some successes of 'modernization' have been celebrated. The 'Bolivian miracle', for example, achieved thanks to drug money: the exploitation of tin ended and, with it, the mining centres and unions that were the most combative in the country. Now the village of Llallagua has no water, but there is an antenna with a

television dish on the summit of Mount Calvario. Or the 'Chilean miracle', created by the magic wand of General Pinochet, a successful product that is sold as a potion to the countries of Eastern Europe. But what is the price of the Chilean miracle? Who are the Chileans who have paid for it – and are still paying? Who are the Poles, Czechs and Hungarians who are going to pay for it? In Chile, the statistics proclaim the abundance of bread and, at the same time, admit the increase in the numbers of the hungry. The cock is crowing victory, but the rooster is suspect. Has failure not gone to his head? In 1970, 25 per cent of Chileans were poor; now the poor constitute 45 per cent of the population.

Statistics admit, but do not repent. In the last resort, human dignity depends on cost-benefit analysis, and the sacrifice of the poor is nothing but the 'social cost' of Progress.

What would be the value of this 'social cost' if it could be measured? At the end of 1990 the magazine *Stern* made a meticulous calculation of the damage created by the development of present-day Germany. The magazine evaluates, in economic terms, the human and material costs resulting from car accidents, traffic jams, air and water pollution, the contamination of food, the deterioration of the green belts and other factors. It arrived at the conclusion that the value of all this damage was equivalent to a quarter of the German national product. The increase in poverty, obviously, was not included in these estimates of damage as, for many centuries, Europe has been nourishing its wealth with foreign poverty. But it would be interesting to know what the figure would be if a similar estimate were to be made of the dramatic consequences of 'modernization' in Latin America. Furthermore, the German state does control and limit, to a certain extent, the system's negative effects on people and the environment. What would be the damage estimate in countries like ours, which believe in the free market fable and allow money to roam about freely, like an uncaged wild beast? The damage that this causes us and will continue to cause us; this system that bombards us with artificial needs so that we forget our real ones – how can we possibly measure it? Can we measure the mutilation of the human soul, the escalation of violence, the degradation of everyday life?

ON THE ALTAR OF PRODUCTIVITY

The West is living in a triumphant euphoria. The collapse of the East provides it with a perfect alibi: in the East it was worse. One should, instead, wonder whether it was fundamentally different. In the West, justice is sacrificed on the altar of the goddess Productivity in the name of liberty. In the East, liberty was sacrificed on the altar of the goddess Productivity in the name of justice. In the South we can still ask ourselves if this goddess is worth our lives.

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DEVELOPMENT AND BUREAUCRATIC POWER IN LESOTHO

James Ferguson

The following text, reproduced from *The Ecologist* (vol. 24, no. 5, September–October 1994), is a summary by James Ferguson and Larry Lohmann of some of the main arguments set out in James Ferguson's book *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990; University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994). *The Ecologist* is one of the world's leading journals on ecology (see also the remarks of Gustavo Esteva on pp. 284ff).

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In the past two decades, Lesotho – a small landlocked nation of about 1.8 million people surrounded by South Africa, with a current gross national product (GNP) of US\$816 million – has received 'development' assistance from twenty-six different countries, ranging from Australia, Cyprus and Ireland to Switzerland and Taiwan. Seventy-two international agencies and non- and quasi-governmental organizations, including CARE, the Ford Foundation, the African Development Bank, the European Economic Community, the Overseas Development Institute, the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Development Programme, have also been actively involved in promoting a range of 'development' programmes. In 1979, the country received some \$64 million in 'official' development 'assistance' – about \$49 for every man, woman and child in the country. Expatriate consultants and 'experts' swarm in the capital city of Maseru, churning out plans, programmes and, most of all, paper, at an astonishing rate.

As in most other countries, the history of 'development' projects in Lesotho is one of 'almost unremitting failure to achieve their objectives'.¹ Nor does the country appear to be of especially great economic or strategic importance. What, then, is this massive and persistent international intervention all about?