

# Anti-Trade: A Vortex of Absurdity

by Barry Loberfeld

**A**mong the more intriguing examples of junk e-mail to come in over the electronic transom of late was this parable for our times:

Joe Smith started the day early, having set his alarm clock (MADE IN ARGENTINA) for 6 a.m. While his coffeepot (MADE IN CHINA) was perking, he shaved with his electric razor (MADE IN HONG KONG). He put on a dress shirt (MADE IN SRI LANKA), designer jeans (MADE IN SINGAPORE) and tennis shoes (MADE IN MEXICO).

After cooking his breakfast in his new electric skillet (MADE IN INDIA), he sat down with his calculator (MADE IN SOUTH KOREA) to see how much he could spend today. After setting his watch (MADE IN TAIWAN) to the clock on his VCR (MADE IN MYANAMAR), he got into his car (MADE IN JAPAN) and continued his search for work.

At the end of yet another discouraging and fruitless day, Joe decided to relax for a while. He put on his sandals (MADE IN VENEZUELA), poured himself a glass of wine (MADE IN FRANCE), turned on his TV (MADE IN INDONESIA) and then wondered why he can't find a good paying job . . . in AMERICA!

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Despite the obvious intent of both the author and the sender, my initial reaction was: What a great place America is to be unemployed! As though Joe Smith would really be better off in that sweatshop in Singapore? What *did* give me pause was the identity of the sender—a man I know to be a reader of this magazine. However, I also know that he is an admirer of conservative pundit Patrick Buchanan, author of *The Great Betrayal*, one of the most popular protectionist tracts of the past few years. I guess it's pretty clear on which side of the fence my acquaintance falls.

Since I found the parable so multiply fallacious, I was beginning to worry that I'd have to reply to the gentleman with a small thesis. Then I realized that the format the author used to express his view should be the same I used to express mine. I came up with this:

Joe Smith started the day early, having set his alarm clock (MADE IN ARIZONA) for 6 a.m. While his coffeepot (MADE IN CONNECTICUT) was perking, he shaved with his electric razor (MADE IN HAWAII). He put on a dress shirt (MADE IN NEW YORK), designer jeans (MADE IN NEW JERSEY) and tennis shoes (MADE IN NEW MEXICO).

After cooking his breakfast in his new electric skillet (MADE IN INDIANA), he sat down with his calculator (MADE IN SOUTH CAROLINA) to see how much he could spend today. After setting his watch

(MADE IN TEXAS) to the clock on his VCR (MADE IN MASSACHUSETTS), he got into his car (MADE IN MICHIGAN) and continued his search for work.

At the end of yet another discouraging and fruitless day, Joe decided to relax for a while. He put on his sandals (MADE IN VERMONT), poured himself a glass of wine (MADE IN CALIFORNIA), turned on his TV (MADE IN ILLINOIS) and then wondered why he can't find a good paying job . . . in ALASKA!

It makes the point, at least to anyone who isn't determined to miss it. However, I didn't e-mail this to the gentleman (not to mention all the other forwarders) for fear that one man's *reductio ad absurdum* might become another man's logical conclusion. Could someone now think that "economic nationalism" is just as bad as globalism and that trade must be forced down even further, to the state—to the *local*—level?

I've recently discovered that that's not an open question. For the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) the threat that multinational corporations pose to American "sovereignty" is paralleled by the threat that chain stores pose to "locally owned businesses."<sup>1</sup> "Devolution" of commerce to the "community" level is an end that justifies every means from "local zoning ordinances to federal antitrust policy." Among the specifics are ATM surcharge bans, market-share caps, a financial transactions tax (proposed by Keynes in 1930) on foreign and domestic trade, an Internet sales tax, "cultural protection laws" ("to encourage local creation—such as films—that might otherwise disappear in the face of Hollywood's hunger for global markets"), an outright prohibition of corporate ownership and protection for small farmers (for example, an anti-"price discrimination" law, which would disallow a buyer to place a large—that is, a "higher priced"—order with a big producer, since that constitutes "discrimination" against smaller ones).<sup>2</sup> In "Free Trade: The Great Destroyer," David Morris, ILSR's director, reveals the vision inspiring these proposals:

[We must] now explore the possibilities and strategies for a new kind of world economy, one whose metaphor would be a globe of villages, not a global village. This would be a planetary economy that emphasizes community and self-reliance. . . . It gives us the capacity to survive if cut off from suppliers by natural or man-made intervention. It encourages us to maintain a diversity of skills within our societies and to localize and regionalize productive assets. . . .

The challenge, then, is to move away from the paradigm of the planetary economy and to create in its place an economy that allows us to produce most of what we need from our own local human, natural and capital resources on a sustainable basis.<sup>3</sup>

## Community versus Self

But isn't there a conflict between "community and self-reliance"; that is, between the interdependence of a community and the independence of oneself?

I've also recently discovered the answer to that question. As part of a feature on "anarchism," the May-June *Utne Reader* presented an interview with "[s]elf-described neo-Luddite John Zerzan [an] anarchist writer and researcher." Contrary to any Rothbardian connotations, Mr. Zerzan defines "anarchism" as opposition to "all forms of domination [which] includes not only such obvious forms as the nation-state . . . [but] the whole van of civilization—armies, religion, law, the state . . . [and even the dawn of] art, and on the heels of that, agriculture."<sup>4</sup> Mr. Zerzan informs us that "life before agriculture and domestication—in which by domesticating others [that is, animals] we domesticated ourselves—was in fact largely one of leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health." Our fall from grace occurred "because for many millennia there was a kind of slow slippage into division of labor." The interviewer asks the logical question: What's wrong with division of labor? And he responds:

If your primary goal is mass production, nothing at all. It's central to our way of life. Each person performs as a tiny cog in this machine. If, on the other hand, your goal is relative wholeness, egalitarianism, autonomy, or an intact world, there's quite a lot wrong with it.

I think that at base a person is not complete or free insofar as that person's life and the whole surrounding setup depend on his or her being just some aspect of a process, some fraction of it. A divided life mirrors the basic divisions in society and it all starts there.

Recognizing the implications of this rhetoric, the interviewer asks another logical question: But humans are social animals. Isn't it necessary for us to rely on one another? Division of labor, it seems, only creates "a form of dependence that comes from relying on others who have specialized skills you don't have. They now have power over you. Whether they are 'benevolent' in using it is really beside the point."<sup>5</sup> Mr. Zerzan then translates theory into practice with a statement I really must quote in full:

In addition to direct control by those who have specialized skills, there is a lot of mystification of those skills. Part of the ideology of modern society is that without it, you'd be completely lost, you wouldn't know how to do the simplest thing. Well, humans have been feeding themselves for the past couple of million years, and doing it a lot more successfully and efficiently than we do now. The global food system is insane. It's amazingly inhumane and inefficient. We waste the world with pesticides, herbicides, the effects of fossil fuels to transport and store foods, and so on, and literally millions of people go their entire lives without ever having enough to eat. But few things are simpler than growing or gathering your own food.

The accompanying profile notes his belief that we shouldn't "discount" the desirability of a return to "hunting and gathering" as a way of life.

What began with tariffs on imports, ends with picking berries for food. Mr. Zerzan has pursued this premise down to its nadir. Now division of labor is not a global, national, or even local evil, but an *intrinsic* one. The inequity of the "power" that the capitalist has over the workers by owning the means of production is eclipsed by the inequity of the "power" that Peter has over Paul simply by being able to do something he can't.<sup>6</sup>

Theory and history demonstrate that at one pole of the opposition to free enterprise looms the total domination of society by the state; at the other, the total *obliteration* of society as such. Applied consistently, the policy of anti-trade would transform the entire world into a deserted island on which each of us is stranded all alone. State despotism or social disintegration, *1984* or *Robinson Crusoe*—this is the choice that the critics of capitalism offer as a more just alternative to the freedom and cooperation of the market.

The only way to avoid being drawn into this madness is not to go anywhere near it to begin with. That means responding to the first rumblings of protectionism with a resolute affirmation of the right of all parties to engage in the peaceful exchange of goods and ideas—be it across the street, the border or the ocean. □

1. Stacy Mitchell, *The Home Town Advantage: How to Defend Your Main Street Against Chain Stores and Why It Matters* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Local Self-Reliance, 2000); see [www.ilsr.org](http://www.ilsr.org).

2. ILSR also publishes *The New Rules* journal in print and on the Web ([www.newrules.org](http://www.newrules.org)).

3. *The Ecologist* (UK), September/October 1990. See also Herman Daly and John Cobb Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

4. You can find his primitivist essay "The Case Against Art" on the Web(!) at [angelfire.com/mn2/anarchistpoetry/articlesdir/article18.html](http://angelfire.com/mn2/anarchistpoetry/articlesdir/article18.html).

5. Curiously, a photograph shows that he wears glasses.

6. This school of thought was critiqued by Murray Rothbard in "Freedom, Inequality, Primitivism and the Division of Labor" in Kenneth Templeton, ed., *The Politicization of Society* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1978). It appeared originally in *Modern Age*, Summer 1971.