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Try This At Home

By Jane Anne Morris*

The Ambassador

It was Colombian Independence Day, so I suppose I should have expected to bump into the U.S. ambassador in the mummy room of the National Museum in Bogota. What better way for the ambassador to demonstrate her deep concern for the people of Colombia and bone up on Colombian history? Like the fact that the National Museum building was originally designed to be the perfect prison -- an application of the principles of Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham's 1787 Panopticon. From a single vantage point, one unseen overseer could monitor all activities of all prisoners, 24/7. Significantly, Bentham noted that the plan would work just as well for factories, schools, poorhouses, and hospitals.

From 1905 until after World War II, "El Panoptico" was Colombia's most fearsome prison. The central surveillance point was a round guard tower (now an airy rotunda sponsored by the Siemens Corporation) with lines of sight radiating out toward eyelid-shaped windows on three floors of tiny prison cells. The Panopticon -- like the junior high school intercom left on when the teacher is out, like the invisible "cookie" behind your computer screen -- is about hierarchy and control. The system requires fewer overseers with whips, because inmates do the heavy mental lifting. Shrouded in a wrap-around one-way mirror, the prisoner (student, teacher, consumer, citizen) is shaped more by the possibility of sanction than by its actual presence. Physical force stands down and waits on-call for special occasions, while self-censorship takes over daily operations. Because it derives its power from the inmates' internalization of the work of the watcher, the Panopticon succeeds whether or not there's anyone in the guard tower.

In Colombia, almost-daily massacres and assassinations are necessary to maintain corporate power, but in the United States the Panopticon is functioning quite well -- it is most often the little man in one's own head that makes people into enthusiastic foot soldiers in the war against themselves. We live in a corporate-controlled Democracy Theme Park. Popular rides include the Regulatory Agency Roller Coaster and the Voluntary Code of Conduct Mule Train. The Reform Gallery features Welfare Reform and Campaign Finance Reform. In the Constitutional Rights Hall of Fame, people can take part in regular reenactments of famous battles. The democracy theme park even has its own museum, where other corporate power grabs are reinterpreted as "peoples' victories."

Ambassador Patterson has a role to play in the U.S. democracy theme park. So on Independence Day, the

ambassador goes not to inspect helicopters used in the "War on Drugs," but through downtown Bogota with its "Plan Colombia = guerra" graffiti to the national museum to check out the props for the "War on Democracy." When not mummy-gazing, Anne Patterson, the U.S. ambassador, is the on-site point person for stage-managing the Colombia campaign, a critical testing ground for global corporatization. Her job is to transform a corporate resource-grab of mind-boggling proportions and unsurpassed brutality into a fairy tale with a "War on Drugs" theme song. There will be lots of heroic action against giant mutant coca plants and cartoonlike bad guy "drug lords." Patterson has lots to do. She has to deny that U.S. aid supports right-wing paramilitary death squads. She has to deny that U.S.-sponsored "coca fumigations" are killing subsistence crops, domestic animals, and people. She has to deny a U.S. role in the provision of a Colombian army escort for a U.S. corporation's illegal drilling on indigenous lands. She has to deny U.S. complicity in the methodical assassination of Colombian labor leaders by U.S. soft drink corporation thugs. She also has to advertise and promote numerous U.S.-backed social, health, and educational programs whose primary existence is on billboards. And she has to read and sometimes respond to letters, faxes, and e-mails from pesky activists in the United States.

The Activist

Patterson is no busier than Sally, from Anytown, U.S.A. Sally -- she's "one of us" -- who keeps a diary of her activism. Here is the last week's worth:

On Monday, she stuffs envelopes for Save the Dolphins campaign, and goes to a neighborhood meeting to discuss organic, sustainable food.

On Tuesday, she does research for her regulatory agency testimony to fight a local corporation's pollution permit; she leaflets at a demonstration to support boycotting a brand of gasoline.

By Wednesday it's time to work on Voluntary Code of Conduct provisions for corporations, then have a meeting to decide which "socially responsible" investments to recommend. (Here there's a note that the meeting broke up after an argument between two factions. One favored the corporation that hires people of color and women to build nuclear power plants; the other favored the corporation that's famous for union-busting but builds fuel-efficient cars.)

Come Thursday, she sits down to write letters to state legislators, urging broader disclosure laws for chemicals. Then there's that fax to Colombia urging the U.S. ambassador to begin an investigation of the latest government-assisted civilian massacre. In the evening she "persons" a literature table at a panel discussion of unions and globalization.

On Friday there's a strategy meeting on helping the Community Health Clinic stay open two days per week. After that her group tries to decide what to do about sweatshops and deregulation.

Saturday is money day. In the morning there's a bake sale to pay lawyers to pursue regulatory agency and court appeals. In the afternoon there's a 5K Run fund-raiser to pay fees, fines, and lawyers to bail out banner-hangers from their last demonstration.

It's Sunday as she looks over her diary, the day that she must set priorities for the next week. She can't possibly contribute to all the causes that she cares about. Should she skip the dolphins and add social security? Should she forget Colombia and switch to Nigeria or East Timor? Should she work on radioactive waste storage and worker safety instead of campaign finance reform and groundwater contamination? Should she skip the demos so she can spend more time in the library reading about others going to demos? Should she dress up as a mutant to publicize pesticide use in public schools?

By this time it's late Sunday night. Sally drifts off to sleep, and has a dream:

At a company picnic, two teams are playing a soccer game. Sally's on a team made up of people from the neighborhood, activists, and other concerned citizens; the other team is sponsored by something called MegaCorporation. Sally's team was getting close to scoring, but then Mega tilted the field so that the others had to run uphill. Then Mega disqualified some of Sally's teammates and declared that certain plays couldn't be used. But Sally and her friends kept playing harder and almost scored again. This time Mega stopped play and decreed that Sally's team would have to play blindfolded. Then they bought off the referees. Sally's team finally scored anyway but the referees said the goal didn't count.

The next morning over coffee, Sally remembers her dream and proceeds to interpret it:

The soccer game is how we're always fighting against Mega Corporation. When they tilt the field, that means that they have a built-in advantage with more resources to use against us, and tax-deductible expenses. Disqualifying our players is like when they sue us for writing letters to the editor, or tell us that we don't have standing. Banning certain plays is like when they say we aren't allowed to bring up certain topics or issues at hearings, or when our testimony is limited to two minutes. By withholding information -- like about what chemicals they're using -- corporations force us to play blindfolded. Buying off the referees is like when they grant favors to politicians, make campaign contributions, and use their political power to influence regulatory agencies and courts. When we score a goal but it doesn't count, that's like when suddenly a corporation is granted exemptions and variances from existing law. Or when a federal court throws out as unconstitutional a local law that we've worked for years to pass.

The Corporations

There is quite obviously a fundamental asymmetry between activist strategy and corporate strategy. We activists dress up as corporate executives to get into meetings and buildings, and as animals to get media coverage. When was the last time a corporate executive dressed up as an Earth First! member or a turtle or an U'wa to get attention for themselves? While we are stuffing envelopes, writing letters to our "representatives," and talking to twelve people at a time in living rooms, corporate executives are writing laws and buying television stations.

While the community response is to play harder -- to try for bigger demonstrations at the Capitol, more letters to elected officials, more experts at the hearings -- the corporate response is to simply change the ground rules. With increasingly unfair ground rules, no matter how hard we play, we won't ever score, or we won't score enough to matter. And corporate ground rules are not intended so much to affect a particular issue -- though they do that -- as to frustrate and dilute people's efforts over a broad range of issues.

People's efforts usually apply to only one issue at a time. Even if we share common values and care about many of the same issues, we are inevitably rivals structurally. Like Sally, we find that if we have spent our efforts trying to save the dolphins or promote sustainable agriculture, we have fewer resources and less time left to work on toxic cleanups or prisoners' rights. This same fragmentation is evident at conferences, where after an opening keynote speech, attendees fan off into an almost endless array of particularized workshops and panel discussions. How to stop one corporation from using one chemical. How to get communities to recycle one type of container. How to get one framed political prisoner out of jail. This isn't what corporate strategy looks like.

Corporate strategy is to change the ground rules for all -- labor organizers, human rights workers, toxics campaigners, everybody. A corporation doesn't have a separate team of lawyers, experts, lobbyists, and public relations persons for each of the thousands of chemicals dumped into the environment. Or for each separate labor law violation. Or for each state, or each voluntary code of conduct, or each chamber of commerce. Most of what corporate strategists do works across the board: it helps the particular corporation in many areas, and, it makes corporations in general more powerful. This is what working on ground rules does for you.

As a result of this difference in strategy, where people's efforts are subtractive and divisive, corporation efforts are cumulative and synergistic. A score or victory for one corporation helps all corporations, but our work on one issue or campaign takes resources from others. In the soccer game analogy, we're exhausting ourselves struggling uphill trying to score a goal, and they're tilting the field. What we have termed ground rules amounts to no less than the political process, the assumptions and understandings that in a democracy are supposed to result in self-governance by the people. The democracy theme park has obscured both the current ground rules and "who" is using and writing them. This "who" is not "The Corporation" because the corporation

is not a who at all. People say "Monsanto did this" and "Philip Morris did that" with the casualness and familiarity you'd expect when describing an errant uncle with a hip flask. The more accurate term for the abstract legal fiction is Monsanto Corporation or Philip Morris Corporation. But corporations don't really do anything. The things that get done in the name of the corporation are done by people. Corporate executives make corporate policy, award each other golden parachutes, and hire lawyers to manage lawsuits and regulatory agency matters. They extract wealth from the work of others, call this the corporation's wealth, then use it to externalize costs onto society and the earth while funneling profits to a tiny group.

Business corporations in their current form -- as vehicles for the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of an elite -- are incompatible with democracy.[1] That's why they are so popular with an elite whose status depends on ensuring that democratic processes don't happen. A corporation is the most recent and most successful effort to do all the things that elites hoped the Panopticon would do: preserve elite power. Corporate executives make decisions and manage the money, while workers follow orders (on pain of losing their livelihoods) and add value. The "corporation" is a legal fiction to hold money and power for a few; it gives them access to "corporate" resources and shields them from responsibility for their actions. But, finally, a corporation is not a sentient being, not a conscious actor, not a target, not a "citizen." It cannot be "punished" or negotiated with. It can't

be "socially responsible," or have an opinion on global warming. It can't have "rights." If people believe it can do any of these things, then the corporation succeeds as a decoy to confuse issues and take the flak for an elite. But the corporation can still be deconstructed, and not a moment too soon. [To be concluded next time.]

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[1] In current U.S. law, the term "corporation" encompasses municipal corporations, for-profit corporations, and many kinds of nonprofit corporations (including trade industry groups and educational and religious corporations). A century and a half ago in the United States, the form that the "business corporation" took would be nearly unrecognizable today. In some cases, for example, stockholders did not have "limited liability" as we know it today.

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