Penny Johnson

STOLEN GOODS

by Tom Bender

We often complain about having to pay too much for things, but do we ever complain because we have to pay too little for something?

Can things cost too little?

When someone stops us on the street and offers us a TV or watch or stereo at a really low price, the first thing that pops into our heads is: "Is it HOT?" Our intuition always warns us that when something costs a lot less than it's supposed to, there is probably something funny going on.

We think about stolen goods when someone offers us a "deal" on the street. But do we think about stolen goods when we find a "bargain" at a supermarket, a discount plaza or an import store? Do we think about stealing from our children when we go to the gas station? Yet we buy gasoline that is cheap because we're pumping out the energy savings of millions of years so rapidly that none will be left for our own future or for our children.

When we buy fresh produce from California in the supermarket, do we realize we are likely buying goods that are produced illegally? Is it less wrong to buy illegal goods from a "Safeway" than on the street? Much of California's produce comes from the Central Valley, where vast corporate farms operate with flagrant disregard of federal and state laws limiting use of irrigation water to 160-acre family farms. And much of the produce is picked by illegal immigrants in violation of immigration, tax and employment laws. Is it stealing when a company that monopolizes food processing sets impossible quality criteria for produce of small independent farmers, then buys their crop cheap because there are no other buyers to whom they can sell?

How do we know if prices for things are low because they are being *dumped*? It's not uncommon for large producers to sell some items below cost to drive out their small competitors who produce more efficiently but can't afford large losses. And how can small farmers compete with corporate farming that *wants* to operate at a loss for tax writeoffs?

Imports also can be too cheap when our trade arrangements and energy sources exploit the workers of other countries (RAIN, May 1976). How would we feel if our country had no source of cheap fossil fuels and another country started to sell fossil-fuel-produced goods in our country so cheaply that we were all put out of work? We would end up having to work for starvation wages to compete with such cheap energy sources and stay alive. Is it right to purchase goods that support such an exploitative relationship?

So what if we do buy stolen goods, or illegally-produced products, or goods that are produced by exploitation? The major problem, it seems, is that when someone loses, someone else gains. *Someone* gets rich off of "stolen goods"—either the buyer or an intermediary or both. When wealth accumulates, power accumulates—whether we speak of large corporations vs. individual Americans or U.S. citizens vs. the

<TBENDER@NEHALEMTEL.NET>

rest of the world. And the more that power is concentrated, the less possible it is to sustain the principles of democracy and equality that our country was founded upon and which are necessary to the kind of society we wish to live in. Buying stolen goods contradicts those principles we claim to believe in and follow, and either we must change or they must.

Whether or not we eventually buy a "hot" TV hinges not only on whether we will get caught, but also—on some level—on a realization that supporting a market for stolen goods increases the odds that sometime we may become the source for such stolen goods.

Chickens always come home to roost one way or another. Exploitation of others eventually comes full circle—if not through rebellion, then through disease—if not through disease, then from atrophy. Wealth insulates and isolates, and, removed from the continual probing and testing of real forces of life, our information and judgment fail to keep us within the limits of the game. (Our Drain America First energy policy is a good example of this kind of failure.) While we become wealthy off of other countries, we are in turn exploited and controlled by the power and wealth of our large institutions.

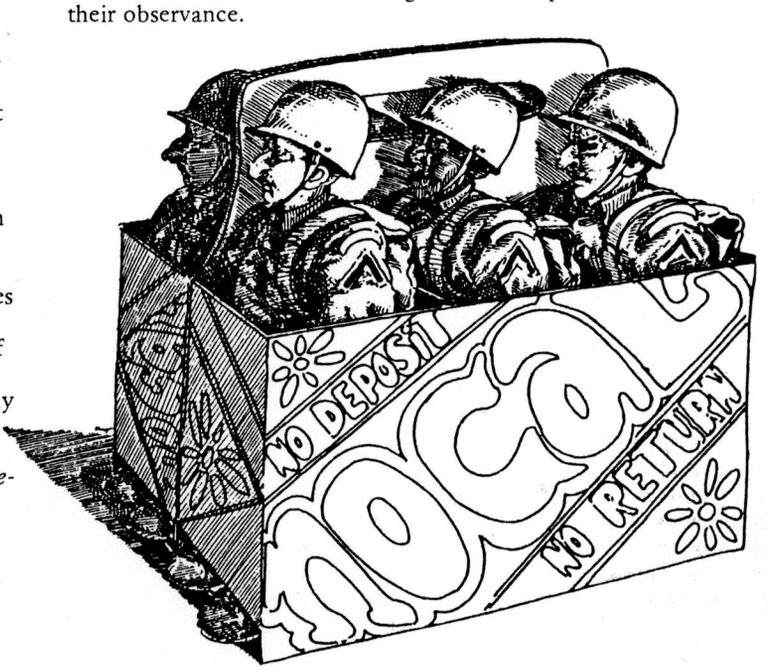
Though we claim and often act otherwise, our purchasing decisions are never based on economics alone. Our so-called economic decisions always occur within limits set by ethics, morals and other social values. We require things to be Union Made. We don't allow child labor. We set the rules on corporate taxes, patents and monopoly that become the rules of the game within which economic trade, survival and success occur. Such ethical frameworks are essential and are more basic than profit or economics because they enable the continued survival and health of the resources, environment, social fabric and personal judgment necessary for our survival and well-being.

The separation of our ethics and our actions has occurred in part because our production and exchange processes are so complex and large that we are isolated and distant from where goods may have been "stolen." Without knowing what occurs or sensing the effects, we have less and less reason to trust our ethical judgment. We're also so wealthy ourselves, as a country, and so unused to doing things ourselves that we often have little sense of value and costs.

"Marked" prices, standardized goods, changing prices, take-it-or-leave-it buying, and prices totally determined by someone else are so universal that we have very little sense of what we're getting for what we pay or what is fair exchange. We don't know *what* we're getting (poly-epoxyl who?), if profit on it is excessive, if taxes were paid, if someone was unfairly paid for making it, if externalized costs were accounted for in its price. And things really *have* been changing so rapidly it's difficult to judge prices. New technical processes produce things more cheaply, but inflation and exhaustion of resources cause prices to swing erratically upwards.

Not only do our economics become confused as a result of all this, but our relationships with other people are harmed. Because we don't know what a fair deal would be, we can only assume that the less we can get something for, the better deal we got. But even then we're uncertain that the other person knows something we don't and we might get taken. And *someone*, it seems, is supposed to get the best deal out of an exchange. Our exchanges rarely give us good feelings towards the people we exchange with. We never end up thankful to other people or wishing to do something nice for them in the future in exchange for what they did or gave us.

All these things tie back to our not knowing what's happening, and so do ways of changing the situation. There are lots of things we can do:

- Reduce the scale of organizations. A small and knowable scale of production is the best insurance against not knowing what's happening. Present regulations discriminate heavily against small but efficient producers.
- Open financial records. Seeing how much a merchant or producer pays and gets for their products pinpoints avoidable expense and profit. More businesses are feeling more comfortable with people knowing rather than wondering. People act differently, too, when they know!
- Encourage local auctions, exchanges, flea markets, used goods sales. They will be more and more valuable in the future, are fun, and are good places to learn what things are worth. They have been regulated away in many communities.
- Exchange with friends and people you know—and *give* more than required. It will usually come back with interest. Remember the baker's dozen.
- Make and do things ourselves instead of purchasing them. Do real and varied work. We can save money, taxes and reduce the GNP while learning the worth of things.
- Get poor—live simply—and avoid the rush later. Reducing desires instead of satisfying them helps get us closer to reality and to the worth of things.
- Learn and share the energetics and economics of our foreign trade and our national economy.
- Regulate foreign trade of items not produced at equal wage rates or with careful energetics. The only trade that is socially affordable is trade of surpluses, not necessities.
- Prevent passing the buck, the costs and the damages caused by our activities on to people who don't profit from those activities.
- Give legal standing to trees, future generations and our shared surroundings so that passing on of costs to them and exploiting them can be controlled.

The more people know about something, the less chance there is of monkey business. There are ethical dimensions to exchange. Their importance to society is greater than the economic dimensions of exchange, and it is up to us to ensure their observance.