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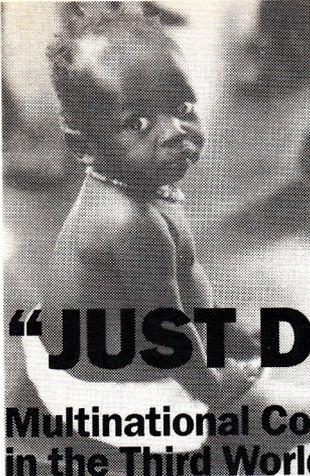
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“JUST DO IT”:

Multinational Corporations in the Third World

by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

Memory is long. If I try hard enough, I can remember traces of my early childhood in my native Ghana, even though I was raised in America. But the damage done by a multinational corporation many years ago in Ghana cast a shadow across my life in a surprising way. It happened shortly after the birth of my daughter, when my mother traveled from her East Coast home to help me with my newborn. “What do you mean you’re only going to breastfeed her,” she asked as she unpacked tins of baby formula onto the kitchen counter. “That’s not enough. She needs the nutrients from formula.”

Months of prenatal literature and childbirth classes had not prepared me for this conversation. I sought the advice of a pediatrician. “I wouldn’t be too bothered if I were you,” he said. “You’re probably just catching the residue of the Nestlé generation.” I did not understand his statement because the name Nestlé only brought to mind chocolate bars. This was all news to me: a company which refused to either change its practices or be held accountable; marketing strategies in African countries pushing the use of baby formula over breast milk; contaminated water; huge numbers of babies dying; a world-wide eight-year boycott; and the passage of an International Code of Marketing for Breast Milk Substitutes (the first of its kind) by the World Health Organization.

I was horrified but nevertheless, I chose to totally forget about it. In my mind the entire controversy could have been no more than a past aberration which, in its wake, had left tremendous damage and misinformation, some of which I was encountering through my mother and other relatives. Upon leaving the pediatrician’s office that afternoon, I vowed never to feed my child formula. Hungry, I then

went into the adjacent pharmacy, bought a candy bar and headed home to nurse my daughter. I did not even notice that it was a Nestlé’s Crunch. I just didn’t think about it.

“Who will ever know what one is responsible for in this world?”
— Jon Robin Baitz, Three Hotels

In the late 1970s there was an unconscionable public service commercial which was aired ad nauseam. It featured a lone Native American riding a horse, staring at a landscape littered with paper, bottles and empty tin cans. The camera scanned the destruction before focusing on a single teardrop gliding down the man’s face. “Keep America clean,” the announcer begged. No mention, of course, was made of centuries of Indian genocide or the fact that Native Americans such as this man, who was being used to gather sympathy, were relegated to reservations — some of which barely had running water.

Similarly in this decade, Americans are being implored to save the American labor industry by buying American products. “Protect our jobs. Look for the Made in the USA label,” the spokespeople caution. What is not mentioned in this call for patriotism is the fact that through a slight technicality, a huge amount of merchandise which is advertised as being made in the USA, is not actually made in the United States proper or by Americans; and that purchase of these products undoubtedly costs American jobs.

Taipan, a United States protectorate, is the home of many U.S. corporate factories. American labor laws are not valid or enforceable in Taipan but since it is a U.S. territory all goods manufactured in Taipan may conveniently be labeled “Made in the USA.”

Some companies are not concerned about hiding where their products really come from. Where multinational exploitation is concerned, Nike, for one, is ever true to its mantra, “Just do it!” Nike, along with Reebok, actually makes only a small percentage of its shoes in the States. Over 99 percent of the ninety million Nike shoes which we buy every year are manufactured in Indonesia through a web of contractors, subcontractors and sub-subcontractors.

While the United States government is quibbling over whether to raise the piddly minimum wage, Indonesian women and children (as young as eight years old) sit huddled in sweatshops assembling sport shoes

We demand that big business give the people a square deal; in return we must insist that when any one engaged in big business honestly endeavors to do right he shall himself be given a square deal.
 —Theodore Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, 1913

Some girls idea o’ business is resignin’ a twelve-dollar job t’ marry a seven-dollar husband.
 —Frank McKinney Hubbard, *New Sayings by Abe Martin*, 1917

In thousands of years there has been no advance in public morals, in philosophy, in religion or in politics, but the advance in business has been the greatest miracle the world has ever known.
 —E. W. Howe, *The Blessings of Business*, 1918

Wise business management...reduces itself in the main to a sagacious use of sabotage.
 —Thorstein Veblen, *The Nature of the Peace*, 1919

In old-fashioned legal firms...there were always two or three young men...who, for a certain number of hours each day, sat at their desks accomplishing trivial tasks, or simply reading the newspapers. Though it was supposed to be proper for them to have an occupation, the crude fact of money-making was still regarded as derogatory, and the law, being a profession, was accounted a more gentlemanly pursuit than business.
 —Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 1920

Some day the ethics of business will be universally recognized, and in that day Business will be seen to be the oldest and most useful of all the professions.
 —Henry Ford

Love your neighbour is not merely sound Christianity; it is good business.
 —David Lloyd George, 1921

In other countries, art and literature are left to a lot of shabby bums living in attics and feeding on booze and spaghetti, but in America the successful writer or picture-painter is indistinguishable from any other decent business man.

—Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*, 1922

The chief business of the American people is business.

—Calvin Coolidge, 1925

International business may conduct its operations with scraps of paper, but the ink it uses is human blood.

—Eric Ambler, *A Coffin For Dimitrios*, 1939

Ninotchka: Why should you carry other people's bags?

Porter: Well, that's my business, Madame.

Ninotchka: That's no business. That's social injustice.

Porter: That depends on the tip.

—Charles Brackett & Billy Wilder, *Ninotchka*, 1939

There's no business like show business.

—Herbert and Dorothy Fields, *Annie Get Your Gun*, 1946

If you can build a business up big enough, it's respectable.

—Will Rogers, *The Autobiography of Will Rogers*, 1949

When I hear artists or authors making fun of business men I think of a regiment in which the band makes fun of the cooks.

—Anonymous

Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art...

—Andy Warhol, *From A to B and Back Again*, 1975

He's a businessman. I'll make him an offer he can't refuse.

—Mario Puzo, *The Godfather*

complete with high-tops, low-tops and arched support systems. These shoes are sold in America for anywhere from \$70 to \$150. The average work day for these employees is 14 hours and their daily salary is the equivalent of 58 cents. They are without recourse. People who organize unions, strikes or the like in their countries are fired, jailed or mysteriously "disappear."

Who can live on 58 cents a day — regardless of where they are living? Does anyone care? Certainly not the governments of countries such as Indonesia that are forced to turn a blind eye because they are in such desperate need of the economy. And certainly not Nike or Reebok, whose CEOs individually pull in yearly salaries which are at least twice the amount of the collective yearly wages of the entire Indonesian shoe workforce.

A recent issue of the *Multinational Monitor*, a publication founded by Ralph Nader to track the activities of transnational corporations, reported that Nike "argues that the jobs [it] supports in the Asia-Pacific region are among the best paying and most desirable jobs in those economies. [A] Nike position paper claims, 'In the Indonesian labor market, numbering 78 million people and suffering from 40 percent unemployment, having a job at all is considered a benefit.' But according to labor activists who have investigated the company's practices in Asia, Nike has pursued a ruthless policy of cutting costs by finding ever-cheaper production sites." In fact, if either Nike or Reebok doubled the salary of its entire Indonesian workforce, the added costs to the consumer would be a whopping one dollar for every pair of shoes.

"Who will ever know what one is responsible for in this world?"

Many of us make diligent attempts to be conscious and proactive. We recycle our trash, we rally to stop the sale of cigarettes and alcohol to minors, we fight against the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers in the soil which bears our food, we organize and participate in boycotts — and still we do not know the damage for which we are inadvertently responsible in this world.

We do not know that Philip Morris, the tobacco company, owns Kraft General Foods; that R.J. Reynolds, another tobacco company, has merged with Nabisco. Each time we feed our children Nabisco crackers or Kraft's Macaroni and Cheese, a portion of our money is

used to support "Joe Camel" and "The Marlboro Man." We do not know that for half a century General Electric has been the industry leader in the manufacture of nuclear weapons; that when we buy NutraSweet and Equal, our funds finance their parent company Monsanto's dangerous hormone-treated milk and dairy products.

In 1994, as we hauled boxes upon boxes of recyclables to our curbs, Ann Leonard of Greenpeace's International Waste Trade Project, discovered in the U.S. Customs reports that Pepsi was exporting an inordinate amount of waste from California to India. She went to Madras and stood atop a hill which was, as she described it, "a mountain of used plastic soda bottles" — all of which bore the label "California Redemption Value."

Though the nature of marketing strategies has changed, many people are unaware that baby formula is still being sold in developing countries such as my own native land of Ghana. Women are still mixing the powders and diluting the condensed fluids with polluted water. Babies are still dying while the unused breasts of their mothers hang like empty sacks of dried leather.

Shame and accountability cannot lie only with the companies that perpetuate these abuses. It is not that simple. For instance it must be recognized that the woman who snacked on that Nestlé bar is, to some extent, as culpable as the men in business suits who invented their strategies without any regard for the effects their selfishness would have on human lives.

The question remains: if we did know, if we were privy to all of this hidden knowledge, would we change the ways we buy, dress, eat and vote; would we come to understand the consequences of our silent complicity? Unlike the Indonesian laborers or the African children, we have immediate resources and tools with which to gain awareness. Contrary to our seeming helplessness in the face of conspiracies and corporations run by people evidently without conscience or care for the humane treatment of the earth and its residents, the buck truly does stop with us — all of us.

*Anyone seeking further information about the goals and methods of multinational corporations can contact "INFACT," a watchdog organization that grew out of the Nestlé boycott and is currently leading boycotts of Philip Morris and RJR Nabisco, targeting four food brands — Kraft, Post, Maxwell House and Nabisco, to get them to stop marketing tobacco to the world's children. Their telephone number is (617) 742-4583. One can also subscribe to the *Multinational Monitor*: (202) 387-8030.*