

REWIRE

-sponse -tread ad: the book

The Diaper Fallacy Strikes Again

by Paulina Borsook

December 3rd, 1997

Oh why, oh wherefore this deep longing to map the way electronics act to the way the rest of the world (industrial, biological, or even human) acts? Why have machine dreams? But then, that strange, curiously self-abnegating will-to-make-like-something-less-human (an ant, a bee, a cyborg) is best left to another discussion. While 'tis true VCRs and fax machines and the Internet get better in many (though not all) respects as more people sign up, neither electronics nor the spread of electronics are the entire world, strangely believe it.

I remain haunted by the story of the illegal immigrants found dead in the desert of heatstroke and thirst. They ended up where they had fallen after being abandoned by the coyotes who had smuggled **them** back into the US after being deported. The only material goods these dead Mexican nationals had with them, aside from the clothes on their backs, were a few videotapes.

This implies the seductive spread of consumer electronics -- who could deny it? But just

as obviously, these people were trying to re-enter a country where they could hold traditional non-knowledge-worker/symbolic analyst jobs (farm hands, gardeners, grunt construction workers, bus boys, domestics -- and yes, factory workers, too). Female illegal immigrants say they enter the country in part because healthcare, such as it is, is better for pregnant women and children.

Population pressure in Mexico, the US economy, relatively rich in traditional measures, including public health -- these are what drove the people, who in another time might have been braceros, to their death. Overpopulation, horrific conditions in Mexican cities, inequity of land-distribution -- these, not the search for a place in the New Economy -- were the prime movers in this theater. The only "more creating more" was the rising unemployment rate and government inefficiency and corruption driving these undocumented workers to a better land.

Jelly bean microprocessors and whatever economies they may bring to certain kinds of industrial processes can't overturn certain basic laws of scarcity. At best they have no effect; at worst they have a deleterious effect on all kinds of economic measures, resources such as timber and potable water and affordable housing.

Water politics in the Western US are now more than ever about scarcity -- population growth in the Southwest means Phoenix and Los Angeles are locked in a Deadly Embrace over the Colorado

River and Moore's Law can't replenish aquifers. And it has to be remarked that semiconductor manufacturing famously **pollutes** magnificently and uses kajillions of gallons of water throughout. Santa Cruz, where I live, has for its almost 200 years of Caucasian settlement been able to survive on its own water for people and farms and businesses -- but will no longer be able to do so within the next decade.

I live in an area where most weeks, at least one if not more of the beaches in this famous surfing city 75 miles south of San Francisco is declared too contaminated by coliform bacteria for people to swim. Too many people overtaxing municipal services, sewers or septic tanks in more rural areas never intended for year-round occupancy. It's possible that through the Law of Plentitude/More gives more, everyone throughout Santa Cruz County might suddenly have the means and will to buy composting toilets, and magically, the cost of these toilets might come down and all might be well. Though it's hard to feature this in a region where 40 percent of the residents are renters and not everyone has the income of a database analyst. More here means more reliance on public works (who will pay for new and better and bigger infrastructure?) and more stress on the ecosystem.

After staging a comeback a few years ago, the famous local Monterey Bay sea otters are dying off (it's not Russian and Yankee pelt-hunters causing the problem this time around), prone to strange opportunistic

infections. Inadequately treated sewage is one possible cause; cooties somehow transmitted from kitty litter (stuff from landfills leaching into the water table, and hence into the sea) is another possibility. More leads to more, but in an unhappily literal epidemiological sense.

It could be argued that the fate of a single, cute, tourist-attraction charismatic-megafauna species isn't that big a deal; but critters such as otters who are almost at the top of the foodchain (sharks, who are at the top, whose population is also plummeting, can eat otters) are markers for the general health of an ecosystem. Just as organisms at the bottom, such as plankton (80 percent less now than in the 1930s), matter too. Development, agricultural runoff, wetlands obliteration, blah blah blah. Healthy ecosystems are usually marked by diversity; a shore ecosystem consisting mostly of condos and bits of beer-bottle glass tumbled smooth by wave-action is not my idea of thriving biodiversity. Have you ever tasted the difference between farm-raised and wild-caught salmon? What are the economic consequences of sick and dying seas?

And timber. Second-growth redwood forests in my bioregion, some bordering on a hundred years old, are being logged at double the rates they were 20 years ago, leading to habitat destruction and watershed unhappiness beyond the range of the actual cuts and erosion and mudslides and floods and general ugliness of community. Increased

global demand for redwoods, I suppose. Increasingly, the harvested trees are being contracted for by corporations far away, in the ever-widening net of global commerce. Natural resources are, I remember from fifth grade, scarce, for they cannot easily be replaced.

I won't even mention the lack of housing, affordable or otherwise, in the Greater Bay Area.

Weekly, there are fatal accidents on Highway 17, the twisty windy treacherous tortuous road connecting Santa Cruz to Silicon Valley. It is not a road designed to be a commuter route; and wishful thinking aside, most people don't telecommute and may not even **want** to telecommute. Intellectual work **is** social, in the face-to-face sense. Yet if more people work at home or set up satellite offices in Santa Cruz, it will be a trial on a locale trying to preserve a modicum of open space, conserve some of its natural resources, and retain some of its character: Not Entirely a Bedroom Community Solely for Well-Heeled Technologists And Those That Service Them (Orthodontists and Attorneys). Santa Cruz isn't Palo Alto. Yet. Nor should it and the rest of Northern California have to be.

It's funny, in these glorious supply-side technology-as-drug-enhancer theories of economics, environmental and human quality of life costs are not factored in. I call it the Diaper Fallacy -- it's much more fun to think Grand Abstract Thoughts about (Divine?) Providence providing

Prosperity -- than to be bothered to think about who wipes the noses and picks up the garbage and absorbs the collateral costs and damage for the outfit. As if, for example, clean water isn't going to become an ever more precious and costly commodity for people and businesses. Strong and thoughtful environmental regulation, considerations of sustainable living -- these aren't usually a part of any exegesis of the Law of Plentitude.

So the Diaper Fallacy points out that making babies, or thinking about making babies (read "startup" for "baby", if you prefer), is fun. Considering the reality of how many times you will really have to change their diapers (or buy them or wash them or dispose of them or manufacture them or pay for **those diapers**), is not.

Paulina Borsook has written for Upside, Mother Jones, Wired, Suck, and FEED and is currently working on a critique of cyberlibertarianism for Broadway Books.

The REWIRED Series on Kevin Kelly's "New Rules for the New Economy.":

Yesterday: New Metaphors for an Old Economy, Doug Henwood on The Law of Connection: Embrace dumb power.

Monday: That Fabulous Intelligence, the introduction to the series.

TOP