



Taking Back Our Lives

IN THE AGE OF
CORPORATE
DOMINANCE

"A wonderfully subversive book. A must-read for everyone who cares."
DAVID G. KORTEN, author of *When Corporations Run the World*

Ellen Schwartz and Suzanne Stoddard

Book Taking Back Our Lives In The Age of Corporate Dominance

Ellen Schwartz and Suzanne Stoddard
Berrett-Koehler, 2000

Recommendation

In the pages of their new book, Ellen Schwartz and Suzanne Stoddard relate this quote from Paul Hawken's, *The Ecology of Commerce*: "There is no polite way to say that business is destroying the world." While Hawken was talking specifically about the physical Earth, Schwartz and Stoddard are not so limited in their condemnation. Business is destroying the world and everything in it: democracy, living wages, healthcare, the nutritional value of food and even our sanity. We'll put it simply: If you agree with that mindset, you'll love this book. If you have any doubts that corporations constitute an evil empire, you won't. Nevertheless, *BooksInShort* recommends that dedicated professionals read this double-barreled critique of the corporate world, just to know how the other side sees you.

Take-Aways

- Corporations have an all-encompassing impact on your work and personal life.
- In these consumer times, everything is filtered through corporate propaganda.
- Corporate control is pervasive in government, education and the media.
- Corporate advertising controls how you view yourself, your life and your desires.
- Economic uncertainty has added to the already high stress felt by working people.
- Corporations looking at the bottom line make decisions with widespread negative impact for all citizens.
- Transnational corporations are not the world's major job providers.
- The corporate drive for a competitive edge is destroying the environment.
- Competition doesn't come naturally to people; it's a learned behavior.
- People are so demoralized that they forget they have choices.

Summary

The Evil Empire

Today, corporations consume people's lives. People are stressed by modern society's relentless work demands and by their personal inability to find enough time for themselves, their families and friends, and their communities.

Yet, people have created plenty of distractions to cope with this severe imbalance. Oddly enough, most adults spend 15 to 20 hours a week "watching other people have experiences" - via television, the Internet, video, film and other media - rather than having their own. Most children spend twice that amount of time as passive spectators. Working and commuting probably take so much of your energy as an adult that you have lost the will to spend your free hours engaged in any experiential activities. The passive entertainment washing over you numbs you.

“The wholesale substitution of machines for workers is going to force every nation to rethink the role of human beings in the social process.” [Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work*]

People succumb to the influence of the slick advertising that surrounds them and live far above their means, sinking deeper and deeper into debt trying to satisfy consumer desires that can never be satisfied. The major media present news and information in a segmented, superficial, sensational way, leading people to feel powerless to make a difference in their own lives and in their communities. The media rarely acknowledge the link between the bottom-line-driven practices of transnational corporations and the loss of living-wage jobs, the ability to protect the environment and other such issues. Today, corporations have an unprecedented power upon society and each of its members. While they have brought material benefit, the profound unforeseen consequences of living in a corporate-driven society have degraded the quality of life. The middle class is vanishing. Even people who are comfortable fear that they could lose it all at any moment. Insecurity fuels the flash points, the already high stress levels that impair your emotional well being and physical health.

“The 22,000 advertisements we see each year are crafted by people whose job it is to make us unhappy with what we have and who we are.”

This darker side of corporate growth is rarely reported in depth since the media and publishers are now part of large corporate bodies. People are over-stimulated and disconnected from themselves and nature. Image, not substance, rules the day, even in democracy and government. Upon coming to America, Thich Nhat Hahn, the Vietnamese monk nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, said, "Here I am in the land of the Information Superhighway. But do you know what one of your greatest problems is? Communication between each other!"

“There is no polite way to say that business is destroying the world.” [Paul Hawken, *The Ecology of Commerce*]

In *When Corporations Rule the World*, author David Korten notes, "Economic globalization is shifting power away from governments responsible for the public good and toward a handful of corporations and financial institutions driven by a single imperative - the quest for short-term returns. The world's largest corporations are downsizing to shed people and functions... It is becoming increasingly difficult for corporate managers to manage in the public interest, no matter how strong their moral values and commitment."

“Because working and commuting take so much of our time and life energy, we have lost the will to spend our free hours in truly experimental activities and to share them with the young people in our lives.”

In 1978, the CEOs of large corporations made approximately 60 times more money than the average worker. By 1997, that ratio had risen to 189 to one. For the majority of Americans, living standards have plunged. For most people, compensation (wage plus benefits) fell between 1989 and 1997, with men experiencing a 7.8% drop.

“Thanks to the slick advertising that surrounds us on television, radio, billboards, newspapers, magazines and the Internet, our desires are teased far beyond the time or money available to satisfy them.”

In actual wages paid across the board, 28% of American workers earn less than \$7.79 per hour - the hourly wage it takes to lift a family of four above the poverty line with full-time, full-year employment. Only 57% of the American workforce earns \$10 or more per hour.

Health insurance for those working in the private sector decreased from 70% in 1979 to 64.2% in 1997, while pension coverage

went down from 51% to 47%. In 1955, union membership was 33%. In 1998, it was only 14%. Almost 90% of all stock is owned by the wealthiest 10% of households and 60% of Americans own no stock at all.

“We live in the Information Age. Translation: too much information, too little meaning and too little wisdom.”

It is a common misperception that the transnational corporations are the world’s major job providers. Although the Global Top 200 control more than 25% of the world’s economic activity, they employ fewer than 18.8 million people, which is less than a third of a one-hundredth of 1% of the world’s workers. Competition and an eye to the bottom line that blinds corporate leaders to everything else has led U.S. corporations to move tens of thousands of jobs to Third World countries every year. In those countries, workers toil in inhuman conditions for inhuman wages that enable U.S. companies to increase their profits.

“For too long we have fallen prey to the expert syndrome.”

The corporate drive to keep a competitive edge also destroys the environment, driving it ever further toward the edge of its capacity to regenerate. Even the safety and nutritional quality of your food is compromised by corporations looking to save a buck. Corporate advertising has made its way into schools in print and broadcast form. Corporate control of government and politics has severely eroded democracy through lobbying and campaign financing.

The Hidden Costs of Competition

Research by anthropologists shows that competition isn’t an instinctive behavior; it’s learned behavior. The modern corporation has perfected the art of competition.

“While corporations would like us to believe that their efforts are ultimately for our benefit, the reality is much different.”

Alfie Kohn, author of *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, has spent two decades studying and researching competition. He wrote: "Our collective creativity seems to be tied up in devising new ways to produce winners and losers. The only way we can think of to socialize with the people who work for another company is to try to beat them in a competitive game... No corner of our lives is too trivial - or too important - to be exempted from the compulsion to rank ourselves against one another... Our lives are not merely affected by, but structured upon, the need to be 'better than'."

“The Iroquois weighed every decision as to its effect on the next seven generations. If we are to leave a world worth having to our children and grandchildren, we must adopt the long-term strategy of sustainable development.”

Kohn refutes every tenet Western society has clung to about the benefits of competition. After reviewing 2,000 studies, he concludes that:

- Competition is not an integral part of human nature.
- Competition does not bring forth greater excellence than cooperation.
- Competition is not more enjoyable than cooperation.
- Competition does not build character.

“How much longer can we acquiesce to a system where the CEOs and major stockholders make a killing by moving our living-wage jobs overseas?”

When the ancient Greeks created the Olympic Games, the whole point was for competitors to achieve their personal best - not to compete against each other. Is it possible to return to the concept of personal best, to produce excellence and have fun, but without making those around you lose? In today’s world, children are pressured to compete academically and physically at school. Sports programs at all levels of education have become a source of pride to schools, leading children to suffer intense pressure to compete and win even when injured. Children no longer play to have fun. They engage in recreational activities in order to beat someone else. Children aren’t taught cooperation; they’re only taught competition.

“The very nutritional quality of our food is being compromised by the quest for corporate profit.”

Psychologist David Walsh, author of *Selling Out America’s Children*, tells the tragic story of a Midwest youth hockey team whose all-

consuming need to win led to the death of a student. The team had traveled out of town for a game. In the hotel where the hockey players stayed over night, several team members raped an eighth-grade cheerleader. When she reported the rape, she was ridiculed and harassed. "She had done the unforgivable - made accusations against star players, without whom the team couldn't win. Many adults in the community blamed the girl herself for the rape and criticized her for pressing charges. She was accused of damaging the future careers of the young men. Three years later, the girl committed suicide, having been continually persecuted by those for whom the truth was too big a threat."

“When will we recognize that we have stepped too far over the line, allowing the profits of transnational corporations to infiltrate every aspect of our lives?”

In their 1998 book, Pros and Cons: The Criminals Who Play in the NFL, authors Jeff Benedict and Don Yeager report that committing violence and breaking the law do not stand in the way of an athlete's sports career. Among the players in the National Football League, one-fifth have arrest records for crimes ranging from drug charges to domestic violence to rape and even murder. "Violence has become so accepted in American life that even criminals are privileged to play on prestigious teams and command dream salaries, because entertaining the public is such big business."

In this society, offensive talk shows pass as entertainment. Violent interactive video and computer games desensitize children to murder. Yet, people are so cut off from their feelings, and so busy in the rat race, that they don't respond with the appropriate outrage at the so-called entertainment that envelops children on a daily basis.

Fresh Choices

People have become too accustomed to "rolling with the punches," no matter how awful the punches may be. The corporate way of life has controlled how people view themselves - thanks to advertising - to the point where they forget who they are. At the workplace, they feel powerless. All the way around, corporate control of virtually every aspect of life has made people forget that they actually have choices.

However, people don't have to accept things the way they are. You can make fresh choices every moment, both professionally and personally. "Change is the word that holds the most hope and the most fear." Even when people's lives are filled with pain, they still fear change. Our current society fuels that natural fear even further. People have good reason to fear losing their jobs and even their homes. The nightly news tells you there is much to fear around you in the form of relentless crime. Any propagandist knows that if you play on people's fears, you can control them quite effectively, making them even more reluctant to seek and embrace change. History will probably remember the current era as "the age of relentless technology, frenetic activity and fear."

Meaningful Work

Perhaps you will recognize yourself in this observation from authors Margaret J. Wheatly and Myron Kellner-Rogers. In their book, A Simpler Way, they state, "Too many organizations ask us to engage in hollow work, to be enthusiastic about small-minded visions, to commit ourselves to selfish purposes, to engage our energy in competitive drives. Those who offer us this petty work hope we won't notice how lifeless it is."

You can find or develop meaningful work for yourself. It is not only preferable, but very possible to create work that you enjoy and that's beneficial to people. In their book True Work, Michael and Justine Toms suggest ways to find your life's calling:

- Take the initiative.
- Keep up your energy and enthusiasm.
- Set an intention.
- Hold the future loosely - don't be rigidly attached to a specific outcome, instead leave some room for surprise opportunities.

Persevere.

About the Authors

Ellen Schwartz is executive director of Invest in Kids, which she founded in 1998 to provide scholarships and mentors to low income, at-risk youth. She is a recipient of the Thread of Hope Award and the Women of Achievement Community and Human Services Award. **Suzanne Stoddard** teaches English and citizenship at Contra Costa Community College and donates many hours to community service, mentoring young people and grant writing for Invest in Kids.
