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An Invasive Trend? It's a Cultural Weed

by James B. Rule

STONY BROOK, New York -- It has taken some time to puzzle it out, but I have come to recognize a variety of disturbing trends as symptoms of encroaching weediness.

The weeds in question are not just life forms but also institutions, technologies, social relationships and mind-sets. They range from foot-and-mouth disease to crab grass, mass market franchises and the invasive onslaught of cell phone conversation. All these are highly aggressive, nonspecialized forms that destroy distinctive local values.

Ecologists agree that, as worldwide biodiversity collapses, a handful of flexible and highly competitive species increasingly dominate more and more environments. The urban pigeon, the zebra mussel and the English sparrow may have fitted gracefully in their original contexts. But their multifarious adaptivity across environments enables them to overwhelm local species and erode differences that make environments distinct, creating a deadening sameness in the place of ecological variety.

Less obviously, the same disquieting processes are pervading quite different domains of experience. Most often, social and cultural weediness manifests itself as the unacknowledged downside of trends widely considered progressive.

Our global "information society" is supposed to provide access to the best products, the fullest information, the broadest viewpoints and the richest arrays of options. But the burgeoning worldwide circulation of people, wealth and information also brings to the fore the most dangerous (i.e., most widely adapted, most competitive) microbes, the most invasive species, the most standardized institutions and the most homogenized forms of human contact.

One social manifestation is what used to be called suburban sprawl - now stretching from American cities into rural areas. From one end of the United States to the other, one encounters the same predictable franchises, the same repetitive architecture and land use, the same patterns of activity and expression.

Shock deepens when Americans travel abroad, finding many of the same weedy patterns invading other countries. But we should hardly be surprised. McDonald's, Toys 'R' Us and similar institutions are highly successful competitors on a global scale; their very success stems from formulae geared to prevail anywhere and everywhere. Such success, of course, comes at the price of lost diversity in local retailing, dining and socializing.

Now the same weedy pattern is invading even the texture of personal communication. New information technologies offer perpetual contact, via mobile

phones, handheld computers and global positioning systems. The result is to disconnect interaction from place - and thereby to erode the identity of places.

Cell phone conversations in restaurants are objectionable not because they are necessarily louder than other conversation, but because they destroy the life-giving particularity of one kind of experience. Instead of the conviviality of diners focusing on a distinctive meal in a distinctive place, weedy talk generates an environment that could be anywhere.

Among the weediest of social species are advertisements. It is getting harder to find an environment not invaded by them. Phone, fax, the Web and e-mail put us in touch with the world, but in so doing also subject us to unwanted, indiscriminate junk communications that clutter our thoughts with informational pap.

Many would readily dismiss these forebodings by saying that this is the course that we have chosen for ourselves. Progress may have its kinks, but clearly the benefits of global commerce, franchised retailing and perpetual information flow must outweigh the drawbacks, or people would not accept these things.

Of course, people do choose. But in grasping at the lure of these bargains, we rarely note the full Faustian price. Embracing a world that seems to make everything available at once can come at the cost of creating a world without the boundaries that make life worth living.

The writer, a professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, contributed this comment to the International Herald.

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