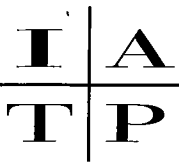

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Truck Scales and Economies of Scale: Weighing NAFTA and the Politics of Transportation

by Kristin Dawkins
February 1993

Table of Contents

Welfare Effects 1

Highway Safety 2

Urbanization 3

Corporate Consolidation 4

Air Regulation 5

Natural Resources 6

Social and Environmental Costs 7

Regulation and Economies of Scale 8

References 9

Charts

Heading South 2

Daily Minimum Wage Rates, Mexican Workers 3

Top U.S. Ports for Containerized Trade 4

Transport Trade 5

Summary of National Highway Receipts and Costs 7

Freight Modes BTU's per Revenue Ton Mile 7

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Truck Scales and Economies of Scale: Weighing NAFTA and the Politics of Transportation

by Kristin Dawkins
February 1993

With special thanks to Bob Babin for research assistance.

Driving along a U.S. interstate highway, one occasionally passes a truck weighing station. More often than not, the sign reads "CLOSED." Some, however, are open: drivers caught with over-weight loads or who otherwise fail to comply with a host of regulations risk losing their licenses and their jobs. Inside these trucks are the guts of the American economy. Nearly 80% of commercial freight in this country — $272 out of $350 billion worth in 1990 — travels across our highways. Less than 10% travels by rail, 6% by water and 4% by air (ICC 1990.)

Altogether, one out of ten workers in the United States workforce is engaged in transportation services. One out of five dollars spent in the U.S. economy is spent on transport. And one quarter of U.S. energy consumption is for transportation purposes. Linking "farms to markets, oil wells to refineries, factories to consumers, homes to workplaces, and people to academic, cultural and recreational activities ... the ever-increasing expansion of our transportation network of roads, canals, railroads, and airways has stimulated the specialization of economic activity and tied the country together," wrote the U.S. Department of Transportation in a 1989 national policy document (U.S. DOT 1989.)

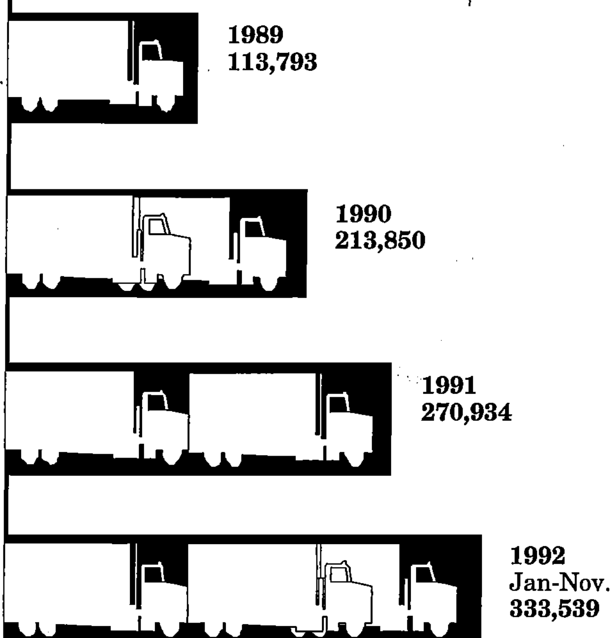
Quite plainly, then, former President Bush's proposal to tie together the U.S., Canada and Mexico will bring about further specialization of activities and further expansion of the transportation infrastructure. When the secret text of the draft North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was leaked to the press in March 1992, newspapers reported that the deal would "create massive north-south links in trucking, busing, rail freight, courier services, and pipelines" (Mander 1992.)

Welfare Effects

Reaction to the leaked draft and to the later official text has been mixed. Generally, the larger transportation companies see new opportunities while smaller independent firms and workers expect to lose out. Immediately after the official text was made public last August, for example, the chief executive officer of Union Pacific, the U.S. railroad with the most freight routes into Mexico, expressed an interest in purchasing shares of Mexico's national railway (Boyd 1992.) And the chief executive of Contract Freighters, one of four major trucking firms already serving routes to Mexico, said he expects NAFTA to generate "tremendous growth down there, like revving up a turbocharger and letting her go" (Bradsher 1993.) But the AFL-CIO's Transportation Trades Department said the proposal would lead to the deterioration of the U.S. transportation system "at a time when the bankruptcy rate of U.S. motor carriers was twice the national average for all businesses" (Brown 1992.)

One provision of the NAFTA would allow U.S. trucking companies to takeover 100% ownership of Mexican trucking companies after 10 years (NAFTA 1992.) Since Mexican carriers do not have to pay workers' compen-

sation and unemployment benefits, nor must they meet more stringent U.S. licensing and safety regulations, and they can pay drivers $7 per day instead of the $140 per day earned by many U.S. drivers (Journal of Commerce 1992), it is easy to imagine that this NAFTA provision could lead to a trucking industry dominated by a few huge U.S.-owned companies based in Mexico.



Source: The New York Times, January 5, 1993

Another NAFTA provision would end the practice of transferring loads at the border from Mexican carriers to U.S. carriers and vice versa, allowing trans-border deliveries and pick-ups by firms from the other country (NAFTA 1992.) As a result, towns on the border face structural unemployment if trucks that have stopped — 432,061 northbound and 333,539 southbound last year through Laredo alone — travel on instead (Bradsher 1993 and Hall 1992.)

Calling NAFTA an "economic earthquake," leaders of labor, consumer and environmental groups travelled by caravan to 60 California communities between Labor Day and Election Day last year to rally opposition to the deal (Schnitt 1992 and Lee 1992.) One of the sponsors, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, has made lobbying against NAFTA a priority on grounds it "directly threatens the jobs and living standards of Teamster members in many different industries, and would affect all Teamster families because of the damage it would do to local communities where our members live..." (IBT 1992a.)

Highway Safety

Last June, Teamsters' President Ron Carey joined the Los Angeles City Council in criticizing the NAFTA and a related Bush Administration order requiring all states to honor Mexican commercial driver's licenses (IBT 1992b), which are not based on the same rigorous training, testing and certification demanded of professional drivers in the U.S. Uneven licensing requirements would also increase the handling risks and the volume of trade in hazardous materials and toxic wastes (Silberger 1992 and Lewis 1993.)

While the NAFTA text exhorts participating countries to "endeavor to make compatible" their licensing and other standards for safety, health, environmental and consumer protection (NAFTA 1992), such exhortation is unenforceable. A report of the Congressional Labor Advisory Committee for Trade Negotiations and Trade Policy (LAC) notes that, even if regional standards were negotiated to comply with the more stringent U.S. laws, this section of the NAFTA sends "a chilling message to anyone who has witnessed first-hand the safety hazards that continue to plague U.S. highways... Insofar as safety is concerned, practical experience over the past decade helps us reach the conclusion that the

federal regulatory and enforcement scheme that has prevailed in the United States on an industry-wide basis has been entirely ineffective."

The Labor Advisory Committee's report to Congress concludes that the NAFTA would "liberalize land transportation and certain landside maritime activities at the expense of U.S. domestic transportation carriers and their employees, and at the risk of compromising safety throughout our transportation network. This is unacceptable and the LAC believes the draft agreement must be renegotiated" (LAC 1992.)

On October 4th, 1992, President Bill Clinton — then still a candidate — said he would not renegotiate the Bush Administration's NAFTA although, in a speech outlining the various conditions under which he endorsed it, he did call for stricter standards for Mexican drivers operating vehicles in the U.S. (Clinton 1992.)

Urbanization

The NAFTA could make Mexico the world's trade center and transportation hub. There are a number of sections in the text that ensure global access to the North American consumer market via Mexico. Under this scenario, Mexico would lose much of its rural agrarian social structure to become an urban industrial economy — losing some jobs, gaining others, and building up its infrastructure. But much of the profitability would accrue to transnational investors.

Indeed, many foreign companies are locating plants within Mexico to enjoy multiple advantages — low tariffs, low wages, low tax rates, and low environmental standards (D-GAP 1991.) But the NAFTA's "rules of origin" — which in theory require investors to utilize a certain percentage of local materials in manufacturing — are so flexible that investors importing component parts from outside North America can escape normal tariffs if their products are "substantially transformed" in North America. This flexibility will particularly favor foreign automobile and computer companies which will benefit from lower tariffs without actually hiring Mexicans to manufacture the high value-added components in Mexico (LAC 1992.)

Daily Minimum Wage Rates Mexican Worker

Job	Daily Wage
Freight truck driver	$6.74
Dredge operator	$6.57
Bulldozer operator	$6.48
Journeyman automotive mechanic	$6.40
Delivery truck driver	$6.11
Journeyman automotive electrician	$6.08
Journeyman plumber	$5.91
Journeyman machinist	$5.85
Warehouse clerk	$5.58

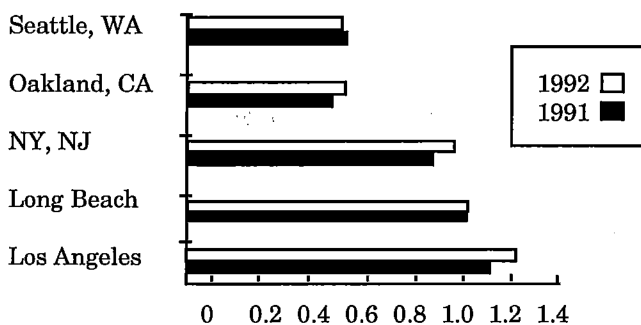
Source: Harlingen Chamber of Commerce, 1991.

Another section of the text, designed to encourage investors in transportation infrastructure, will allow 100% foreign ownership of Mexican port facilities for "enterprises that handle their own cargo" (NAFTA 1992). George Kuvakas of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union Local 94 believes this could ruin the Los Angeles port, presently the largest in the United States, but it will also enable companies operating in Mexico to avoid hiring local workers — much like the 1990 Reciprocity Amendment tacked onto the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act. It says that any country allowing U.S. sailors to unload in their ports has reciprocal rights to let their sailors un-

load in U.S. ports. As a result, said Kuvakas, "In 1991, 4000 ships called at our port in Los Angeles. Of these, 2700 met the requirements allowing the seamen to unload by themselves. Right now, the Japanese are investing in a couple dozen ports in Mexico now under construction. When they're built in 5-10 years, L.A. could lose out as a port and our Mexican brothers won't have a fair shot at organizing" (Kuvakas 1993.)

And finally, there is NAFTA's "accession clause," which will allow any country in the world to sign onto the agreement providing it accepts the text with no re-negotiation and that the original three parties accept the newcomer (NAFTA 1992.) Already, Chile, Australia, New Zealand and a number of Asian countries have expressed interest in acceding to NAFTA (Mander 1992c and Mander 1993.) Yet each new participant will alter trade flows, relative economies and transportation routes dramatically — to the advantage of the major exporters and shipping conglomerates.

Top Five US Ports for Containerized Foreign Trade



In Millions of 20-ft. equivalent units, imports and exports

Source: Adapted from Reports by Port Import / Export Reporting Service.

Corporate Consolidation

The chief executive officers of the major shipping companies are eager to win control of these new opportunities. The CEO of the Maersk Line, the third largest operating in the United States, explained that Maersk is inaugurating new service to Chile, Peru, Colombia and Panama while overall consolidation within the industry "will continue providing customers an opportunity to deal with fewer carriers without reduced frequency of sailings." The CEO of Evergreen America Corporation, the second largest, pointed straight at "vessel sharing, schedule rationalization and antitrust immunity" which give Evergreen "a wider berth on how we deal with our competition." And the CEO of Sea-Land Service, Inc., number one in the U.S., said that NAFTA and other "stunning geopolitical and macroeconomic forces on our business ... favor our industry [and] Sea-Land's global infrastructure ... gives us an edge" (Shipping 1993).

In the spirit of competition, most port authorities try to generate public sector support to meet the infrastructure needs of the shipping industry; "seamless intermodal facilities" are currently in demand (Shipping 1993.) As the executive director of the Port of Tacoma, Washington, said, "It does a port little good if it has the best container cranes and intermodal railyards in the industry, if it cannot offer quick and cost-effective cargo transfers between highway, rail and air connections to assure the smooth flow of goods to and from all corners of North America." Many states are subsidizing improvements to ensure such "seamless" connections can be made at their ports — although California's budget crisis last year led that legislature to allow the state's port cities to reallocate these funds for other purposes (Cantwell 1993.)

Railroads have also invested in intermodal facilities with Mexican destinations in mind

(Boyd 1992.) Southern Pacific, the largest of these companies, now uses intermodal facilities to route goods by rail to Mexico from trans-pacific vessels docking in California. Trains carry the goods — primarily auto parts, steel and textiles — into the border region of Mexico's tax-free "maquiladora zone," into Monterey, and on to Mexico City. Some of these containers return bringing Mexican beer into the U.S. and some bring back auto carpets for Canadian automobile assembly, but many return empty. Indeed, empty returns were factored into the investment plans (Kuvakas 1992.)

US Waterborne Imports From and Exports To Mexico

January through September

	Imports	Exports
Millions of Dollars		
1991	4060	1176
1992	3872	1434
percent change	-5%	22%
Metric Tons		
1991	34828	6464
1992	35831	7382
percent change	3%	14%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Report FT-920.

Air Regulation

Many airlines are looking toward Mexico for increased cargo business thanks to NAFTA although, like the trains, they have been returning northbound relatively empty, too (Taylor 1992). Generally, southbound flights have been carrying auto parts, electronics, refrigerators and other Asian products destined for the "maquiladora" assembly lines while northbound flights carry lesser quantities of finished computers and some seafood and produce (Shaw 1992 and Maggs 1992.) The airlines have been investing in intermodal systems with air-truck connections ready to accommodate demand imbalances and off-line destinations; they hope air will become more competitive with ground transportation, given long distances and inadequate highways and railroads, as NAFTA expands production capacity throughout Mexico (Maggs 1992.)

Actually, air transport was not even included in the NAFTA negotiations, but a 1991 bilateral agreement between the U.S. and Mexico settled access questions and mapped out expansion plans allowing each country to add two additional carriers to their all-cargo fleets of ten and four companies respectively. Already, the airports of Dallas/Forth Worth, New Orleans, and Houston are "jostling for position" to compete with Miami for the anticipated southern cargo routes to Mexico and the rest of Latin America (Maggs 1992.) And Tijuana's airport is constructing a new terminal and two new runways to accommodate jumbo jets and Asian air traffic — without the participation of San Diego in what had been proposed as a joint binational project called "TwinPorts" (Tamaki 1992.)

The Tijuana project includes a controversial aircraft maintenance facility with Japanese architects and Hong Kong investors (Hitchcock 1992a.) The project has been criticized as a threat to air safety; recent deregulation of the industry allows foreign maintenance facilities to contract out repair work to sources that have not been certified by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA.) Nor will workers at the Tijuana plant have recourse to occupational safety and health regulations governing the use of volatile fuels and corrosive chemicals (Northwest Labor Press 1992.)

In testimony before the U.S. Congress last year, an official of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers emphasized that regulating air safety is a

problem in the U.S., too. "Currently," he said, "air carriers in this country largely police themselves, under FAA supervision [but a] number of incidents involving faulty maintenance practices and the sale or use of bogus or counterfeit aircraft parts in this country, have highlighted the difficulty of maintaining standards here, much less abroad." He concluded, "It appears obvious that the North American Free Trade Agreement coupled with the relaxation of the FAA rules governing foreign repair stations will have a negative impact" (Hitchcock 1992b .)

Canadian airlines and airports, too, fear negative impacts on their freight industry. As a senior Air Canada official noted, there may be opportunities for some expanded trade with Mexico but "perhaps the bigger issue is what is happening between the United States and Canada." Huge cargo carriers like Federal Express and United Parcel Service are poised to infringe on Air Canada's service to its domestic market and, increasingly, Canadian industries are moving south to non-union low-wage states in the U.S. (Ryan 1992.)

Natural Resources

For Canadians, the north-south realignment promised by the NAFTA will reinforce that which began when Canada signed a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States in 1988. Canadian trucking and railroad companies set up spurs to the south, moved south, or were bought up by larger U.S.firms — leaving smaller communities along Canada's east-west population corridor underserved (Barlow 1990.)

Likewise, the FTA established rules ensuring that Canadian natural resources will be shipped south, even in the event of a national shortage in Canada (Clark and Gamble 1989 and Shrybman 1990.) The NAFTA reinforces these rules, obliging Canada to export certain resources to the U.S. in proportions no less than that supplied during the prior three years (NAFTA 1992 and British Columbia 1993.) Already, major construction firms are building immense "megaschemes" for canals, pipelines and powerlines that will provide the southerly flows of Canadian water, gas and hydro-power (Barlow 1990 and Linton 1992.) As bold as this may seem, U.S. Senator David Durenberger of Minnesota explained, "The first principle of water policy ... is that rational thinking doesn't apply... Water is a political, not an economic, commodity" (Linton 1992.)

Mexicans, too, saw U.S. companies using the NAFTA to gain access to their natural resources — in this case, constitutionally- protected oil reserves. In November 1990 during a visit to Monterey, then-President Bush agreed: "Of course we want to have access to Mexican oil," he said. "Foreign investment in activities reserved to the [national oil industry] Pemex have emerged as the most red-hot issue in the negotiations to form a North American free trade zone," wrote Professor Godofredo Vidal of Mexico's Autonomous Metropolitan University last year (Vidal 1991.)

In Mexico, public opposition to altering their Constitution stalled the negotiators (Fraser 1992.) As a result, the NAFTA text recognizes that "Mexico reserves to the Mexican State goods, activities and investments in Mexico in the oil, gas, refining, basic petrochemicals, nuclear and electricity sectors." Nonetheless, investors will be allowed to participate in "non-basic" activities including refining, independent power production and energy transportation activities (NAFTA 1992) and U.S. and foreign oil companies will benefit from NAFTA in the long run (Fraser 1992 and Mander 1992b.) Overall, both Mexico and Canada will lose policy tools, such as export taxes and quotas, to manage and protect their domestic natural resources (ACN 1993.)

"NAFTA is an attack on democracy," summarizes a bulletin of the Action Canada Network. "It will further undermine the laws of all our governments... [T]his hemispheric zone will be dominated by one country, the U.S., and has been designed for one reason — to benefit transnational corporations and privileged minorities. The energy clauses in NAFTA extend the continental sharing of our non-renewable oil and gas ... to meet the huge U.S. demand" (ACN 1993.)

Social and Environmental Costs

U.S. demand for energy is by far the greatest in the world. As a nation, we consumed nearly 60 barrels of oil equivalent per person per year in 1988, compared to about 25 per person in Europe and Japan and less than 5 per person in the developing countries (Gray, Tester and Wood 1990.)

Clinton's energy tax on BTU consumption will hit domestic air cargo carriers hardest

	Freight Modes BTU's per Revenue Ton Mile
Railroads	523
Air Cargo Carriers (Domestic)	21,738

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Transportation Systems Center, National Transportation Statistics (Washington, D.C.: U.S.Government Printing Office, 1983), Tables 49-56, p. 121-27.

The ratio of U.S. energy use to that of the rest of the world is even worse when expressed relative to productivity; U.S. oil consumption per unit of national output in 1990 was more than three times greater than Japan and more than six times that of West Germany (Flavin 1992.) Americans travel in their cars and trucks, on average, about 12,000 miles per year — twice as far as people in other industrialized countries (MacKenzie, Dower and Chen 1992.) And in Los Angeles alone, people sit in vehicles waiting in traffic jams a total of 430,000 hours daily (Boyd 1991).

Summary of National Highway Receipts and Costs (Billions of 1989 dollars)

Sources of Receipts		
User Fees	$ 44.3 (60%)	
Other Sources	$ 29.3 (40%)	$ 73.6 (100%)
Highway Costs		
Costs Borne by Users		
Construction and Repair	$ 20.0	
Maintenance	$ 8.2	
Other	$ 18.2	$ 46.4
Costs Not Borne by Users		
Construction and Repair	$ 13.3	
Maintenance	$ 7.9	
Highway Services	$ 68.0	
Value of Free Parking	$ 85.0	
Health Costs from Air Pollution	$ 10.0	
Reduction (20%) of Natl. CO2 Emissions	$ 27.0	
Security Costs		
Strategic Petroleum Reserves	$ .3	
Military Expenditures	$ 25.0	
Accidents	$ 55.0	
Noise Costs	$ 9.0	$ 300.5
Total		$ 346.9
Deficit		$<273.3>

* Automotive share only

Sources: *Highway Statistics, 1989.* Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, FHWA-PL-90-003, Table HF-10.

The Going Rate: What it Really Costs to Drive. MacKenzie, James. World Resources Institute, June 1992, p. 14.

Huge City Subsidies for Autos, Trucks, California Transit, September 1986.

Many 18-wheel trucks display stickers proclaiming their owners' substantial tax contribution to highway maintenance, evidence of the extraordinary wear-and-tear caused by these mammoth vehicles. And yet these payments only cover, on average, about one third of the $71 billion budget for highways in the United States — a figure which ignores environmental and social costs.

A more accurate budget for the costs of automotive transport would reflect the costs of air pollution, the risks of climate change, health and safety risks from congestion and accidents, noise pollution and vibration damage, the security costs of importing oil, and the almost incalculable losses due to paving 2% of all the land in our vast nation. This budget, as calculated by the World Resources Institute, actually reaches $300 billion annually (MacKenzie, Dower and Chen 1992.)

Of course, merely accounting for these costs does nothing to reverse the trend (Couto Soares 1992) toward ever-greater dependency upon oil and automotive transport in this country (Schipper 1990.) And the NAFTA does nothing to steer North American transportation energy use in a more sustainable direction, either. First, the text on automotive goods eliminates barriers to investment in the production of combustion-engine vehicles in low-cost Mexico. Second, the rules of origin encourage ever-wider sourcing of ever-cheaper parts. And third, it modifies the "fleet content definition found in [the U.S.] Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards... After 10 years, Mexican production exported to the United States will receive the same treatment as U.S. or Canadian production" (NAFTA 1992.) This would allow the big automakers to effectively block citizens' campaigns for ever-stronger miles-per-gallon requirements, as their Mexican-made vehicles — which presently face no such regulations — could hold down the North American fleet average until at least 2003 (Audley 1993.)

Regulation and Economies of Scale

Transportation is just one of the sectors of the economy in which the provisions of the current NAFTA (and other so-called "free trade" agreements) harm the environment and society as a whole while promoting de-regulation and the consolidation of huge corporate interests. But it is the essence of *transport* — "to carry from one place to another," according to the dictionary — *on a global scale* which is problematic about unregulated trade policy. As Wendell Berry put it, "we have allowed our suppliers to enlarge our economic boundaries so far that we cannot be responsible for our effects on the world. The only remedy for this that I can see is to draw in our economic boundaries and shorten our supply lines so as to permit us literally to know where we are economically" (Berry 1992.)

At a time when "fresh food" is practically an oxymoron — food in the U.S. already travels an average of 2,000 kilometers before it is eaten (Ritchie 1992) — such advice seems attractive. Indeed, "[t]he distance and relationship between consumers and producers has to be narrowed," wrote the representatives of non-governmental organizations from all over the world at last summer's Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in their "Alternative Treaty on Trade and Sustainable Development." The full text outlines, in detail, how "[e]conomic integration [c]ould be an instrument of the peoples aiming at relationships that are not hierarchical but that are politically, economically and culturally complementary ... based primarily on participatory democracy and not market forces" (Alternative Treaty 1992.)

Because the market has failed. In *For the Common Good,* Herman Daly and John Cobb discuss six social functions that are essential to the theory of markets but which the actual marketplace cannot perform; they note that governments cannot perform them, either, when economic power is centralized globally while political power is decentralized to the national, state and local levels (Daly and Cobb 1989.) This is how transnational capital is escaping regulation — using the NAFTA and other corporate-inspired proposals for undemocratic global institutions to do so.

In Europe, people are engaging in fierce debate over the Maastricht proposal to build a federal European Community. Much of the debate swirls around the concept of "subsidiarity," a term that is "shorthand for two platitudes as old as politics itself: that political authority should be exercised at the level most appropriate to the function in question; and that government of any kind should supplement, not replace, action by individuals and families" (Adonis and Tyrie 1992.) While, in Europe, national politicians are worried about being superceded by a new

central government in Brussels, we citizens of the world need to worry about our democracies being eroded by corporate institutions. The concept of subsidiarity — in conjunction with others like multilateralism, transparency, representation, and accountability — "can be used as a means of evaluating foreign policy proposals and devising just international instruments and institutions" (Dawkins 1993.)

Fairness and balance are other principles that can guide planners of a sustainable trade policy: "[e]xchanges of goods and physical resources between local economies should be oriented to compensating for differences in their respective natural resource endowments," suggests David Korten of the People-Centered Development Forum (Korten 1992.) David Morris of the Institute for Local Self Reliance wrote, "The movement toward sustainability is ultimately a movement against waste and inefficiency. Its goal is one that economic developers share: extracting the maximum value from a given resource" (Morris 1992.) Pratap Chatterjee adds, "Companies need to be viewed as living, breathing and excreting organisms. We have to look at everything that goes in and everything that goes out" (Chatterjee 1993.)

NAFTA does just the opposite. It does not compensate local communities for their role in trade, nor does it minimize waste and inefficiency, nor does it enable the public to examine the companies' balance sheets. In order to look at those companies and their products — like chickens and other foods that have travelled thousands of miles — we need more regulation and more truck weighing stations, not less. But we also need institutions that will guarantee that those responsible for violations, the corporate officials who would be the "winners" of the NAFTA proposal, lose their licenses (Grossman and Adams 1993) — and not the truck drivers.

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