

BRET WALLACH

A World Made for MONEY

ECONOMY, GEOGRAPHY, *and*
THE WAY WE LIVE TODAY



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A WORLD MADE FOR MONEY

Introduction

I'm stopped at a traffic light in the college town where I live. It's a recently renovated intersection, an expanse of new and very white concrete about a hundred feet square, six lanes crossing four, plus right- and left-turn lanes. One corner is occupied by a Walgreens. Kitty-corner there's a CVS. They seem evenly matched, but the Walgreens parking lot has two or three times as many cars as the CVS lot. I don't know why. Walgreens is open twenty-four hours a day, but can that explain the difference? It's a puzzle.

A third corner is occupied by a bank built a few years ago on the site of an old gas station and low-rent convenience store. I forget the bank's name, but I have an excuse: this town of 150,000 people has at least fifteen banks, some with several branches. It must not take a lot of money to open a bank, because I saw this bank under construction and, with the exception of the vault, it's a balloon-framed wood building faced with brick and trimmed with synthetic stone. Apart from the tower adorned with a nearly illegible clock, the building might be mistaken from where I'm stopped for a new house.

The fourth corner is more unusual. It's occupied by a freestanding dentist's office built to look like a small-town railway station in the Old West. It has another tower and another clock, but beneath the clock there's a sign stating the elevation to the hundredth of a foot. The owner, it seems, is a serious railway buff. In front of the building there's even a full-sized wooden model of a funnel-stacked, wood-burning locomotive.

There used to be a restaurant on the site. It was part of a chain and had been built about fifteen years earlier. It served Southern-style meals—mostly fried chicken—throughout the day. Eventually

it closed, and the building sat vacant for a couple of years. I thought we might get another bank—you can't have too many—but the dentist came along, demolished the restaurant, and built what he calls the Dental Depot. He keeps it open six days a week, but he's never there. Two young dentists, recently joined by a third, run the place while the owner concentrates on building more depots. The chain already stretches from Phoenix to Dallas and Tulsa.

The corner where I'm stopped was first settled by whites during the Oklahoma land run of 1889, and though it's only half a mile from the center of town, it was at the city limits until about 1940. Since then, it has gone from farmland through a complete cycle of construction and demolition. It is now well into the second cycle. This kind of churning bothers me because I retain the childish assumption that the world is permanent. I know better, but habits die hard. Right now, in the minute while I'm waiting for the light to change, I'm struck by something else, something that has never occurred to me. It is that everything I see has been built to make money.

This is like realizing that baseball involves bases and basketball involves baskets. In elementary school I delivered 282 newspapers twice a week. Folded into hatchets and tossed to lie near front doors, the newspapers formed a tiny fragment of my neighborhood landscape. They were my own bit of blight, thrown there because I wanted to make money. I never thought of it, but I knew it as fish know water.

Now, sixty years later, I look for exceptions. Clearly, the city did not pave the streets and install the new traffic lights to make money. On the other hand, these things exist primarily to help the town's residents get to or from the town's businesses. Indirectly, the lights and streets exist largely for money.

I think of the town's residential neighborhoods. Years ago, one of the builders told me that he stayed small because he couldn't build more than a hundred homes annually without sacrificing quality. Now he's up to almost 500 a year. In fact, he's now on the list of the top-hundred builders in the country. More power to him, but he's sacrificed quality. We could be polite and say that quality was trumped

by the builder's competitive spirit, but the measure of that spirit is his bank account.

The developers of the town's commercial space are mostly from out of town. I remember the architect for a chain restaurant who came by to check a new location. It was on the edge of a small lake. Somebody suggested that he modify the restaurant's layout so customers could see the water. No way, he said. He had to be at his next site by Thursday.

Someone might object that this is a college town and that the college is by far the town's biggest employer. True, but the sorry response is that under a rhetorical veneer—Oxford and all that—the students are here (and their parents certainly are paying for them to be here) to learn how to make money.

I look at the wider world. The corner I have just described is a bagatelle compared to the superregional centers of America's big cities. It's a good thing card readers don't make as much noise as old cash registers; otherwise, the people near those centers would all be deaf.

It's no better out of town. If I drive 30 miles in any direction I am likely to see old cotton fields ruined by erosion that nobody worried about so long as cotton made money. If I travel a bit farther, I can find oil fields and coal mines that exist only because someone hoped to make money and in many cases makes money still. Occasionally I fly through Dallas–Fort Worth International Airport and notice from the air what appear to be freshly cleared building sites, hundreds of them scattered and isolated on the prairie as though for people redefining large-lot living. The clearings aren't what they seem. In fact, they mark gas wells tapping the newly prodigal Barnett Shale, the first big success for hydraulic fracking. Last I looked, the Barnett had sixteen thousand wells spread over 5,000 square miles, and not one had been drilled for any reason other than to make money.

I hope I am not misunderstood. Sitting at the intersection I've been describing, I like being able to adjust the air-conditioning in my fine American automobile. I can point you to a good cheese shop up the road and to a classic diner down the other way. On a less bouncy note, I know perfectly well that I would be dead if it weren't for the world

made for money. Modern medicine has saved my hide at least once and has repaired significant damage more than that, and I know that modern medicine could not exist without the immense undergirding provided by the world made for money.

And so I waffle. I know I am supposed to hate Walmart. The trouble is that I also believe that Walmart is a lifesaver for the poorest people in a thousand towns—and not just for the people who shop at Walmart—because the Beast of Bentonville pushes down prices at all its competitors. It gets worse, I'm afraid, because I also defend Monsanto. How could I do such a thing? The answer is that I believe that if all the farmers in the world suddenly adopted traditional methods of growing heirloom varieties, we would quickly find ourselves in a global famine. In the same way, I know—trust me, I'm well trained—that I'm supposed to hate ExxonMobil, but the world uses about 25 billion barrels of oil annually, and the implications of oil spills, carcinogens, and greenhouse gases are insignificant next to the prospect of our tanks running dry.

I do understand that the Chinese factories churning out cheap clothes and iPads aren't much better than the coal mines of the Industrial Revolution. In a way, they may be worse, because coal miners at least kept their pride. I do understand as well that a world made for money exacts a terrific environmental price. Smog used to be the obvious symbol of it, but climate change may soon be a more engulfing one. There's something else wrong with a world made for money: it's unbelievably, never-endingly, stupefyingly ugly and boring. I can tweak that a bit: nobody ever loved a landscape made for money.

Well, I'm probably wrong. There are people who will insist that they love Dunkin' Donuts. Fine: the *L* word is elastic. I will say instead that the places I have loved have not been made for money. What bothers me most when I consider this fact is that I am so completely immersed in the world made for money that I forget that there is a choice.

Every now and then something comes along and sets me straight. My brother, for example, has the misfortune to live on the fringes of the San Francisco metropolitan area, which I escaped nearly five

decades ago. He recently picked me up at the San Francisco airport and we headed east over the Bay Bridge. (How many times I crossed that bridge in years past! How pleased I was in my car with its 413-inch engine, high-lift cams, and high-ratio differential. I miss its sound still.) We drove through the infinity of Oakland, crossed the once-beautiful San Joaquin Valley, then began rising (in more senses than one) into the Sierra.

I hadn't been to Yosemite Valley in over forty years, and though it was very familiar, I reacted to it differently now than I had then. In my twenties I had taken the valley as a challenge and walked lickety-split up to the top of Yosemite Falls, leaned over the safety bars up there for all of five minutes, then jogged back down to the valley floor. Now I stood in the meadows, walked very little, and thought what an incredibly beautiful place this was. Yes, that's the voice of decrepitude for you, but it's also something else. When John Muir railed against the construction of a dam at Hetch Hetchy, he said that we might as well wall up our churches to make water tanks. Forty years ago and more I got the metaphor, but now it was more meaningful. For this, I blame experience. Only after seeing Scotland and Morocco and the Karakoram and Java do I appreciate how remarkable Yosemite is, how with its waterfalls in spate it is as breathtaking as Europe's cathedrals.

Blame the mountain air; I will desist. I want to correct, however, the idea that the only alternative to the world made for money is the natural world. Of course, it's true that the natural world was not made for money, but neither were most of the world's cultural landscapes, certainly not those made more than a few centuries ago. Think of the famous monuments that form a daisy chain across Eurasia. They are draped from the Alhambra to the Parthenon, from Hagia Sophia to Al-Aqsa, from the tomb of Jahangir to the Sun Temple at Konark, from the tortured stones of Angkor's Ta Prohm to the inconceivably perfect carpentry at Nara and Horyuji.

Think of simpler things too: the stepped paddy terraces of the Orient or a homesteader's cabin in Nebraska. The world made for money, I remind myself, is a recent thing, its current near-ubiquity a matter

of perhaps a lifetime or two. I won't quibble about a precise date of birth, though for myself I see Sir Francis Bacon as the pivotal figure in the emergence of the new world. With his insistence on practical knowledge for practical ends, he was laying the foundation for Watt's steam engine and Edison's electric light and all the rest.

I think of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and James Agee's agonizingly detailed description of an Alabama sharecropper's cabin. Agee presses himself against the rough planks of the building and tries to understand them through the sense of touch. If memory serves, Tolstoy does something similar in the harvest scene in *Anna Karenina*. So does Mark Twain when, in *Life on the Mississippi*, he writes about Captain Bixby's knowledge of every bend, bar, and ripple along a thousand miles of ever-changing river.

For my part, I remember a house I rented for half a dozen years in far-northern Maine. It lay out of town in a sparsely settled, hilly landscape with valleys so broad that the view from the house stretched northwest over 5 miles of potato fields and fir trees to the St. John River, which marks the Canadian border.

I do not know when the house had been built, but this was and is an Acadian neighborhood, settled after the British in the 1750s drove the Acadians from their homes in what are now the maritime provinces of Canada. I don't think the house was anywhere near that old, but it had been built with methods older still. It measured about twenty feet by thirty, excluding a simple lean-to probably added in the 1950s for a kitchen and bathroom. The original part of the house had two stories, each with four rooms, and there was a full basement stuffed tight each fall with eight cords of firewood.

Snow covers this part of Maine without a break from late November into May. By then the basement was empty, all the wood carried armload by armload up a tight staircase to a simple wood-burning stove on the floor above. The firewood was either sugar maple or American beech, both of which burn very hot, but the house stayed warm also because its walls were solid planks between two and three inches thick. They were laid horizontally, narrow edge on narrow edge and held

together not just with dovetailing at the corners but with finger-thick wooden pins inserted in holes drilled every few feet along the narrow edges of the planks. Cedar shingles covered the outside, though by the 1970s they had disappeared under a layer of green asbestos siding.

A few years after I left Maine, the house was demolished by the owner's son, who wanted central heat, maybe even air-conditioning for those six days of August. Perhaps he didn't like the idea of sleeping in the same room used by his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. The old house in any case didn't go gently. A bulldozer came to knock it down, but instead of collapsing the building just shuddered and moved, intact, off its stone foundation. I miss the house even now, though it's been gone for almost thirty years. I find myself mentally touching its rough planks or patting the always-cool stones of the basement walls.

A decade before moving to Maine, I had managed a small apartment building in Berkeley. It was brand new and I thought it was great, partly because it was new and partly because it was modern, which is to say absolutely functional. It had eight two-bedroom units divided into two blocks each of four identical apartments, two up, two down, a garage below. Between the building and the sidewalk there was a pathetic foundation planting—a few uncared-for shrubs buried in mulch. Nobody ever paid them any attention.

A real-estate company managed the building for the young Hong Kong couple who owned it. I met them only once and briefly, I suppose because they wanted to approve the real-estate company's plan to let me collect the rent and take care of things in exchange for a discount on my own. It worked well because there was really nothing to do except occasionally calm noisy students. The last time I passed by—and it was a decade ago or more—the building was still there. I saw it but didn't look for long. It made me vaguely uncomfortable, perhaps because it had lost the newness that had been its appeal or perhaps because a closer look would lead me to wonder at how I could have considered an investment property to be a home.

Or I think of a shop that opened a few years ago near my office. It sold Indian imports, including food. There was a shelf with those

small boxes that contain a foil bag that you dump in boiling water for three minutes. You fish it out, cut the corner, and pour the contents into a bowl. Bon appétit!

I asked the shopkeeper which variety he liked best. He said, "I don't eat any of them. My wife cooks proper food." With honesty like that his shop was bound to fail, and it did, quickly. Still, the question lingers: What's wrong with those little pouches? Why wouldn't the shopkeeper (or me) like them any better if they were prepared according to a master chef's recipe by well-paid workers in a sparkling factory using only organic, fair-trade ingredients? The answer, I think, is that the people chopping eggplant in the factory are making money, not food. In exactly the same way, the house in Maine was built as a place to live, while the apartment building in Berkeley was built to make money. It's a pretty basic distinction. Cue the dying Kane: "Rosebud, Rosebud."

So it's a conundrum: the world made for money is a literally lifesaving triumph while, simultaneously, it is a prison. This is not a conundrum that I will settle in these pages. My much more modest aim is to describe, survey, or take stock of this world we have made for money. I allow myself only the occasional judgment, so that the reader may read a page, think that the things I'm describing are appalling (or amazing), yet remain unsure whether I agree. Often enough, I am myself unsure on which side of the fence I stand. I have a habit of standing simultaneously and uncomfortably on both.

I have begun in that most familiar territory, the shopper's world, where I start with fast food (Ah! The reader's judgment bursts so quickly into reactive flame!), department stores, Walmart (how not), supermarkets, and shopping centers. Then I turn to manufacturing. I begin with something with which we are intimately familiar—soft drinks and beer—then turn to clothes, automobiles, airliners, and some general remarks about the industrial battlefield.

I spend a great deal of time on transportation, without which we would promptly starve or freeze, and then turn to the oil industry, without which the wheels would stop. I consider mining, without

which those wheels (and so much more) could not be made, and then I come to industrial agriculture, which amounts to farming for money.

Industrial agriculture is growing at the expense of subsistence agriculture, which is to say farming not for money. Here I consider both the many programs designed to ameliorate rural poverty (how words from Latin make everything so pleasant!) and the much more powerful force of migrants abandoning their villages and ancestral lands.

This brings me to cities. I begin with Asia, where urbanization is occurring at a speed and with an energy greater than any adjective conveys. I scan Europe—London, Moscow, Paris—then come home. Americans are terminally ambivalent about cities, which brings me to my final section, which begins with the American suburb—an expression of anti-urbanism if ever there was one—and goes on to consider some of the other ways in which people express their need to escape a world made for money.

The net is thrown widely, yet there is nothing about banking and other financial services. For this omission I have an excuse, namely, that I'm interested in the visible world, and money can't be seen. An honest explanation would also have to include the admission that I do not understand banking, though in that department I have much company. I recall an author some years ago who, superb in his research into the oil industry, said that nobody would ever penetrate the secrets of the world's banks.

There is nothing here about African or South American cities—or Australian or Canadian ones. There is nothing about the automotive industries of China or India, huge as they are. There's nothing about inland waterways, nothing about the forest industry, nothing about fisheries, nothing about the mining of copper and the quarrying of limestone. Originally I touched on all these things—well, everything except the limestone—but the pages fell to the floor for brevity's sake. So I too have done my best to avoid history, not from disinterest but because if I dwelt more on the past I would have had to say less about the present.

One thing I have kept in abundance. More than newsmagazines, I like newspapers, and the reason is that newspapers often let their

sources speak for themselves, without paraphrase. On almost every page that follows I have borrowed a quotation or two caught by a newspaper reporter. The quotations are almost always informal, yet they have an authority that paraphrases and syntheses cannot match. I do try to write clearly—no easy thing—but the gold is in the quotations, which are like the master strokes in a landscape painting, in this case not of a meadow or seascape but of a world that, for better and for worse, we have made for money.

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1 Shopping

John Locke uses the word *consumer*, but there is no fun in it; the word for him is a mathematical expression, standing on one side of an equation and balanced against *producer*. Daniel Defoe uses the word in an equally analytical way. So does our own Ralph Waldo Emerson. Then the clouds break. Richard Sears comes along and, it's no exaggeration to say, changes the world. Calculation is gone, and with the "Consumer's Guide" section of the Sears, Roebuck catalog for 1897, Richard Sears invites the world to dine.

FAST FOOD

Burger Wars

And so, 115 years later, Americans spent \$175 billion annually on fast food. The leading provider was headquartered in Oak Brook, a Chicago suburb. There, a nondescript, eight-story office building on McDonald's Drive housed the center of an empire with over 14,000 restaurants in the United States and that many again spread over 120 other countries.

The average McDonald's had annual sales of \$2 million. The most popular item for several years had been the Double Cheeseburger, anchor of the Dollar Menu. The average restaurant sold 350 of them daily, but many franchisees in 2008 said they were losing money on the Double Cheeseburger. What could be done? The solution was simple: remove one slice of cheese, call the result a McDouble, and swap it for the Double Cheeseburger on the Dollar Menu. What else? On the assumption that people lusted after fries, the company took them (and Coke) off the Dollar Menu, raised their price above a dollar, and replaced them on the Dollar Menu with ice cream and cookies. Anything else? In 2012 McDonald's rolled out the Extra Value

Menu to compete with Burger King's Value Menu and Wendy's Super Value Menu. None of the items on it were new, but customers might be drawn to what now appeared to be a special.

Three-quarters of the company's restaurants in the United States opened at five in the morning, and many ran twenty-four hours. No wonder: breakfast provided a third of McDonald's revenues in the United States. The chief operating officer for the United States said, "I'm amazed at the people who work for me who take their kids to hockey at 4 a.m. and 5 a.m. I want us to be open when they need us." Most of those customers didn't have time to park and come in. That's why two-thirds of McDonald's business in the United States was at the drive-through. The company introduced double-lane drive-throughs. To save another dollar, they spelled them "drive-thrus."

McDonald's looked hard for another blockbuster on the scale of the Egg McMuffin. That popular breakfast sandwich had been the invention in 1975 of a Santa Barbara franchisee named Herb Peterson. Who could match him? The Arch Deluxe failed in 2005. Over the years subs and pizzas had been tried and abandoned. A spicy chicken sandwich, introduced early in 2006 with "a bold blend of chipotle spices," was axed after six months. In 2013 the Angus burger bit the dust. Hope rose with the Asian salad, with arugula, mandarin oranges, and sesame ginger sauce, but that died too. The chicken snack wrap looked like it might be a hit with consumers who wanted something between lunch and dinner.

One retired McDonald's executive warned of the perils of a long menu. "You try to push people through the drive-thru," he said, "but you give them a menu that takes a half hour to read." McDonald's already had over a hundred items on that menu. The president of McDonald's USA in 2014 lost his job after less than two years, in no small part because a growing menu slowed things down. "In retrospect, I would have taken more time on that," he said. Ironically, a *Consumer Reports* survey of its 32,000 readers rated McDonald's hamburgers as the worst of twenty brands, which hinted why the unfortunate president had been in a hurry to introduce new products.