

# Reviews of Economics Films

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<http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/gschnedr/FilmReviews.htm>

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**To High School Teachers:** This list was compiled for college students, but many can be used in high schools. Some that Geoff particularly recommends for high schools are: *Earth and the American Dream*, *Free Trade Slaves* (or *Zoned for Slavery* which is shorter), *Affluenza*, *The Big One*, and a new release not on the list yet: *Money for Nothing: Behind the Business of Pop Music* (available from the Media Education Foundation in Massachusetts, [www.mef.org](http://www.mef.org)).

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**ADVERTISING AND THE END OF THE WORLD** (Northampton, Mass: Media Education Foundation, 1998, 47 minutes). Advertising and the End of the World presents a compelling and accessible argument about consumerism and its impact on the earth's future. But perhaps the best part of the film is the discussion of the role of commercial culture in shaping our values and manipulating our emotions. The analysis of commercials is gripping and superb, as we are taken through how advertisers try to get us to connect products with love, friendship and sex. The narrator, Sut Jhally, does a bit too much talking on camera, but overall a very effective film.

**AFFLUENZA** (Oley, PA : Bullfrog Films, Inc., 1997, 56 minutes). This film, narrated by Scott Simon, argues the focus on material goods in modern society is the cause of many of our current problems. We are told by advertisers to be unhappy with what we have, and that we will be happy and cool once we buy more stuff. Yet materialism leaves people unhappy and unfulfilled. People end up working harder to purchase even more goods, which undermines families. Additionally, the increased production of useless items has devastating effects on the environment. Simon argues that the only solution is simple living: we must learn to produce and consume fewer goods, use resources more efficiently, and work on recreating the bonds of community that materialism has destroyed. Overall, a very effective indictment of consumer culture, economic growth and materialism. Wonderful use of commercials and humor to demonstrate the absurdity of contemporary culture.

**BATTLE OF THE TITANS** (New York: Filmmakers Library [distributor], c1993, 54 minutes). Outstanding documentary showing US workers losing their jobs due to less expensive foreign competition. Explores labor market issues in LDCs where unionization and strikes are brutally crushed. Good film to introduce students to globalization, labor issues, and the international mobility of capital.

**BIG ONE, THE** (Burbank, CA : Miramax Home Entertainment, c1998, 90 minutes). Michael Moore's premise is that, in 1996 in the midst of an economic expansion with record corporate profits, he can find an example of downsizing in every town he visits on his book tour (for *Downsize This*). And this is exactly what he shows: corporations earning huge profits, often with the help of corporate welfare, yet they are still laying off people and moving overseas. Using various gimmicks and stunts, Moore targets corrupt politicians, corporate welfare, and our economic system, which according to him is an "evil empire" of capitalism. The coup de grace is a series of exchanges with Nike CEO Phil Knight, in which Moore pushes Knight to open a Nike plant in Flint, Michigan and to do the right thing by his workers. Knight, of course, refuses. Overall, a funny, irreverent, meandering film which nicely captures the plight of the working class in the modern economy.

**CLOCKWORK** (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, c1981, 25 minutes).

Explores the effects of Taylorism and scientific management on the workplace. Illustrates the profound effects mechanization and monitoring had on workers.

**CONSUMING IMAGES.** (Films for the Humanities) Reviewer: Charles Sackrey.

Comments from the catalogue: "Bill Moyers looks at a society inundated with visual images. From billboards

to bus stops, from rock videos to newsstands, mass-produced images have become the air we breathe." Is this "pure manipulation, the appropriation of language and meaning," or the "dawning of a new era"? While there were merits to this film, we did not think it held up well at all when compared with its counterparts from the Media Education Foundation, especially "The Killing Screens," with its more direct focus and language.

THE CRASH (PBS Video, 1999, 55 minutes). Excellent treatment of the issues surrounding the Asian financial crisis by the Frontline series. Complex financial market issues are explained very clearly, making the film useful for that purpose alone. William Greider, George Soros, Jeffrey Sachs and others discuss the rampant currency speculation that culminated in busts in Mexico, Asia, Russia and Brazil, along with the bailouts and austerity measures that followed. The program reaches the conclusion that unregulated capital markets along with IMF bailouts led to a situation in which the people lost and the financial markets won, and that regulation of financial markets is the only way to prevent similar events from happening in the future.

DOES AMERICA STILL WORK? (PBS Video, c1992, 57 minutes). At the height of the Rust Belt primaries, Frontline goes to Milwaukee where presidential candidates tap the deep-seated anxiety and insecurity that fuels tensions between American businesses and their employees. This program looks behind the heated political rhetoric to see how companies, workers, and civic leaders are wrestling with global competition and the end of an era of industrial affluence. In a volatile economic climate, what do corporations owe their employees and their communities?"--Container. a good film, but a bit dry, and less effective than "Beating the Bottom Line."

EARTH AND THE AMERICAN DREAM (Santa Monica, CA : Direct Cinema Limited, 1993, 90 minutes). Chronicling America's story from the point of view of the environment, it demonstrates that what was done in the name of progress has had enormous environmental repercussions. A powerful indictment of the costs of economic progress that students either love or hate, but is always very useful in forcing students to confront the costs of living as we do. There are a number of graphic images (a mountain of buffalo skulls, clubbing of baby seals, animals in oil slicks) that are quite shocking, but which do make an impression on students. Overall, a moving film that never fails to generate excellent classroom discussion.

ENERGY ALTERNATIVE SERIES. (Filmmakers Library.) Reviewer: Charles Sackrey. This is a three part series, and I watched the third installment, "Power to the People." Assuming that this installment is substantively similar to the first two, it would be more fruitfully connected to a course on economic development than to Principles. Also, it presumes more economics, as well as knowledge of the world, than our beginning students seem typically to have. Though not helpful to us, in my judgment, I think it might be useful to development, energy, or environmental courses.

ESCAPE FROM AFFLUENZA (Oley, PA : Bullfrog Films, c1998, 55 minutes). This film is a sequel to the film "Affluenza" which explores the virtues of Simple Living. The film examines a number of families that have voluntarily downshifting, reducing their hours of work as well as their consumption of commodities. While the film is a little slow, it does present a compelling argument that downshifting is good for the family, community and the environment.

FOOD OR FAMINE (Nature of Things series, Canadian Public TV. Publisher: Filmmakers Library). Rather dull treatment of the problems associated with the green revolution. Modern farming techniques are causing soil erosion, increased usage of pesticides, and increased reliance on chemical fertilizers which are potentially harmful to humans and the environment. Instead, we should pursue organic farming techniques which preserve the ecosystems of the world. Might be OK for an environmental economics course or a course focusing on agricultural economics, but not very exciting, and far too specific for a general economics course.

FREE TRADE SLAVES (Princeton, NJ: Films For the Humanities, c1998, 58 minutes). Graphic, disturbing, often gripping treatment of the problems in free trades zones around the world. While the film meanders a bit, it very effectively illustrates the problems generated by global free trade. Stories of labor abuses and the conditions in sweatshops are horrifying, but the discussion of birth defects and health problems created by Maquilas ignoring environmental laws are even more gruesome. The filmmakers connect these issues nicely to the global race to find the cheapest wages and the least restrictive environmental laws. The filmmakers then

suggest that workers around the world need the right to unionize and to decent conditions, and that we as consumers should use our power to punish companies that continue to abuse people and the environment. Overall, a very effective film which has a broader focus than "Zoned for Slavery."

**FUTURE OF WORK** (New York : Filmmakers Library, c1995, 25 minutes). Jeremy Rifkin discusses a future which computers have eliminated most traditional occupations. To Rifkin, the only solution to the dilemma of modern technological progress is to reorient the way we distribute goods and services. Rifkin advocates paying people for public service and volunteerism. Not the most exciting of movies, but an interesting topic which provokes a reaction from students.

**GLOBAL CAPITALISM AND THE MORAL IMPERATIVE** (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities, c1998, 29 minutes). Moral and religious leaders warn that global laissez-faire is producing consequences similar to those of the 19th century, when gaps between rich and poor kept thousands in abject poverty for generations. It appears that economic and political reforms are necessary to halt these trends, but there is currently no mechanism for global reforms that are needed. An interesting introduction to some of the issues surrounding globalization, but a vague and unfocused concluding segment makes the film less appealing than "Battle of the Titans" or "Globalization and Human Rights."

**GLOBALIZATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS** (New York, N.Y. : Globalvision, c1998, 57 minutes). This film explores both sides of the debate over globalization. Business leaders argue that trade and globalization benefit people around the world by raising living standards. Labor and human rights advocates argue that globalization is undermining human rights and that corporations are too powerful. Corporations willingly operate in countries run by repressive regimes and use their power to push for concessions instead of for social progress. Overall, a balanced, effective treatment of globalization that works well as an introduction to the realities of the global economy and the theory of comparative advantage.

**GREAT DEPRESSION: MEAN THINGS HAPPENING** (PBS Video, c1993, episode 5, 57 minutes). Part of the PBS series on the great depression, this episode explores labor strife during the depression. Begins with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the South, which was crushed with the help of local government. Moves on to the fight in the steel industries in the north. Discusses the Wagner Act and its impact. Excellent documentary footage of the brutality which strikers faced at the time. Contains some great lines from Roosevelt.

**GREED: with John Stossel** (New York, NY: ABC News, 1998, 45 minutes). John Stossel takes us through Adam Smith's argument that Greed is a universal motivation that empowers economic growth for all by responding to the needs of consumers. Stossel equates greed with the thirst for knowledge, and argues that philanthropists would benefit the public more if they invested in new business ventures instead of giving money to the poor. According to Stossel, the free market does everything better than the public sector does. An extreme, biased but somewhat powerful argument about the benefits of an unfettered market system. A very useful film to present the ideas of Adam Smith. I find it useful to show this film in conjunction with "When Children Do the Work," to show the downside of free markets.

**GREENING BUSINESS** (Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 1994, 46 minutes). Outstanding film that goes through the negative externalities created by most businesses and then spends time working through possible solutions to these problems. The film questions whether or not growth is a good thing, and makes the argument that all production should occur in an environment in which the consequences of production for people and the earth are an explicit consideration. Quite well done, and less heavy handed than "Earth and the American Dream."

**HOLDING GROUND: the Rebirth of Dudley Street** (New Day Films, 1996, 58 minutes). Through the voices of committed residents, activists and city officials, this documentary shows how a Boston community organized the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and was able to create and carry out its own agenda for change. Documents how planners usually ignore the opinions of the people directly affected by policies, and provides a powerful message that committed community action can lead to economic development and revitalization, along with safer streets and a better place in which to live.

HUMAN TIDE (Nature of Things series, Canadian Public TV. Publisher: Filmmakers Library). This film predicts dire consequences if the world does not begin to reduce population growth. The film begins by reminding us that the predictions of The Population Bomb were accurate: population growth is indeed exploding. While population growth in the West is more devastating than population growth in the 3rd World (due to consumption patterns), the filmmakers believe the Earth is nearing its maximum carrying capacity. Overall, a mediocre film with many scary statistics, too many talking heads, and little to offer in the way of solutions.

INVISIBLE WALL (Publisher: Filmmakers Library). This film focuses on the developmental wall between the North and the South. While poor countries rely on exports of primary products, which they sell at prices they cannot control (prices which have been falling steadily), the North sells expensive manufactured goods. The South has been forced by indebtedness to engage in Structural Adjustment policies (sponsored by the World Bank and IMF) which promote markets, privatization and exports. But these programs have resulted in falling primary product prices, foreign ownership of southern companies, and little growth. In many cases, development funds for these programs go to dictators and elites instead of the general population. Furthermore, debt service payments from the South to the North amount to 6 Marshall Plans, so there is a massive net outflow of funds from the South to the North. Meanwhile, Northern agricultural subsidies, promoted by huge agri-business conglomerates in the US and Europe, are undermining producers in the South. Yet the North continues to trumpet the benefits of the market system. John Kenneth Galbraith notes that the market system has only survived because of a mixture of market incentives and state activity; markets require government regulation and support. While Milton Friedman argues that corporations need no social conscience, the filmmakers note that trade promotes only corporate interests; social goals can only be preserved by regulating the market and constraining trade. Inequality and rampant consumerism are dangerous and destabilizing forces which must be checked. The inequality between the North and South is particularly evident as Northern pollution causes global warming and as pollution is dumped in LDCs, so Southern LDCs are bearing many of the costs of Northern development but are receiving few of the benefits. Overall, a good film which is a bit dry in places (many talking heads) but contains some sophisticated economic analysis and some interesting issues to talk about in an economics class.

JOBS, NOT WHAT THEY USED TO BE: THE NEW FACE OF WORK IN AMERICA (Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1996, 57 minutes).

Somewhat slow film that talks about how the organization of work has changed since the advent of the Information Age. Focuses on how traditional corporate hierarchies have been replaced by teams in which workers have much more decision-making power. But the film also notes that wages have declined and work hours have increased for most people, so only the most highly educated and skilled workers are benefiting from the information revolution. Possibly a good film for a labor class, but not very stimulating.

KILLING SCREENS (Media Education Foundation, c1994, 41 minutes). Superb indictment of television by George Gerbner (narrated by Jean Kilbourne). Clearly demonstrates the connection between television violence and increased violence in our society. People do not prefer violent shows, but this form of media is cheap and easy to produce, so studios continue to produce large quantities of awful, hateful programs and movies. Unfortunately, the social consequences are devastating.

LAID TO WASTE (Philadelphia, PA: Drexel University, c1996, 53 minutes). Explores the efforts of the citizens of Chester, PA to fight hazardous waste incinerators in their town. Vivid depiction of environmental racism. Demonstrates that corporations hold all the cards when it comes to the control of the community. Clearly demonstrates the concept of a negative externality. Film is slightly confusing to those not already familiar with Chester, so it should be supplemented with an informational handout that describes the history and issues in more detail.

LIVING ON THE EDGE (PBS Video, c1995, 57 minutes). Excellent documentary (from the PBS series Frontline) tracing the lives of two Milwaukee families. Both families are devastated when the fathers lose their jobs because their employer, Briggs and Stratton, moves its operations overseas. Demonstrates how hard working and desperate much of the blue collar is today. Students respond very well to the film's depiction of

the economic and social costs of unemployment. Part of a series which includes two other excellent documentaries, "The Minimum Wage Economy" and "Does America Still Work?"

**MADE IN BROOKLYN** (New Day Films, 1993, 55 minutes). Reviewer: Charles Sackrey. This film argues that the decline in manufacturing that is occurring in New York City, and which has been brought about in part by city planners, is both unnecessary and, over the long term, disastrous. The film focuses on a number of light manufacturing plants that have emerged in Brooklyn in the past few years that have brought much needed jobs to locals, one third of whom are immigrants. The film points out that in NYC the move to a service economy means that almost all living-wage jobs will be in the upper end of the service economy, where, in light manufacturing plants in Brooklyn almost all jobs produce living wages. In its own way, the film is a paean to skilled manual labor and the instinct of workmanship, quite refreshing in this informational world.

**MCLIBEL: TWO WORLDS COLLIDE** (London: One-Off Productions, 1997, 53 minutes). Follows McDonalds' lawsuit against two English activists who criticized McDonalds for creating bad jobs, destroying rain forests, promoting poor health, generating huge amounts of waste, being cruel to animals, and deceiving customers about their practices. Good film for portraying the power of multinational corporations and how they use this power to stifle free speech, along with the amazing effects that two committed activists can have in raising awareness and making a difference.

**MODERN TIMES** (Key Video, c1989,1936, 87 minutes). This movie is a devastating satire on the effects of mass production on the lives of factory workers. Charlie Chaplin plays a factory worker who cracks under the strain of his job, and is forced to take jobs as a night watchman and a singing waiter. Excellent companion piece for Clockwork, as it focuses on the dehumanization of the workplace and the alienation of labor.

**ORGANIZING AMERICA: A HISTORY OF TRADE UNIONS** (Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1994, 42 minutes). A very short introduction to the labor movement in the US. Walks through the achievements of the labor movement (8 hour day, better working conditions, no child labor, the minimum wage) and the abuses of capital (company towns, strikebreaking). There is some excellent footage of early sweatshops and child labor, but much is glossed over, the film does not effectively demonstrate why unions are still important, and it meanders a bit toward the end. Overall, only an adequate introduction to the labor movement.

**RED CAPITALISM** (Filmmakers, 1994). Reviewer: Charles Sackrey. This concerns the free enterprise zone in Southeast China, how it is affecting the Chinese there, and its rippling effects on the rest of the country. A central focus is on highly trained people, like physicists or other scientists, who come from the rest of the country to the enterprise zone because they can make better money there doing low-skilled wage work. Has persuasive bits on how children are being acculturated according to the new "capitalist" rules in the enterprise zone, how much income disparity there is, how rapidly the zone is growing compared to the rest of China, and so on. I think it is a very good film, indeed, about capitalism, in general, and about how it is developing in China. I came away ever more inclined to think that the 21st century will be dominated by China.

**ROGER AND ME** (Burbank, Calif. : Warner Home Video, 1990, 91 minutes). Comments from film box: When hard times came to his hometown, Michael Moore sunk every penny he had into filming "Roger & Me". He emerged as a modern folk hero, because he doggedly and hilariously pursued what every working person wants to do - talk to the man at the top. Moore's efforts to meet General Motors chairman Roger Smith and to get Smith to visit Flint, Michigan provide the framework for the film.

**RUNNING OUT OF TIME** (Films for the Humanities, c1994, 57 minutes). Scott Simon narrates this look at modern society in the era of dual-income families. Contrasts the US economic system with that of Japan, where 10,000 people die from overwork each year, and Germany, where workers have 6 weeks of paid vacation and a 32 hour work week. Looks at issues such as job sharing, shortening the work week, and the simple living movement. Generally very well done, if a bit scattershot.

**BEATING THE BOTTOM LINE**, Surviving the Bottom Line series, part 4 (Princeton, NJ : Films for the Humanities & Sciences, c1998, 58 minutes). In this concluding episode of Surviving the Bottom Line,

Hedrick Smith finds companies that are generating new jobs and staying competitive while keeping work in America. Their success is in a large part due to cooperation between management, labor and local government. The cooperation between all stakeholders leads to increases in productivity, which allows firms to stay competitive with corporations that have chosen to move overseas for cheap labor. Smith goes on to explore the economy of the Netherlands, where management, labor and the government collectively make important economic decisions and businesses are able to stay competitive despite a very short work week and superb benefits. An excellent film which nicely documents to benefits of managed capitalism.

TAKEN FOR A RIDE (New Day Films, c1996, 55 minutes). Superb documentary which describes the manner in which General Motors systematically dismantled public transportation systems in all of the major US cities. The film demonstrates that GM was directly responsible for replacing trolley systems with buses. GM and the highway lobby then promoted the interstate highway system and the expansion of interstates into downtown areas. This is an amazing story of how the entire landscape of the US was changed because of the profit-seeking behavior of our largest corporation.

THUS GALBRAITH (PBS, WGBH, Boston, c1997. 60 minutes). Interesting biography of John Kenneth Galbraith which spends much time on his career in politics but little time on his economic ideas. The choice of William F. Buckley as narrator is odd, despite his friendship with Galbraith. Buckley spends much time discussing criticisms of Galbraith's work without developing Galbraith's ideas fully. Ultimately, people interested in Galbraith's life and times (especially the influence of the Depression and Keynes on his ideas) will enjoy the film, but it is not suitable for an economics class.

WHEN CHILDREN DO THE WORK (Oakland, CA: We Do the Work, c1996, 25 minutes). Excellent documentary about the problems of child labor in developing countries. Includes most of "Zoned For Slavery" (see comments below) as well as a section on the horrors of the carpet industry in Pakistan. Students will think twice about the products they buy after viewing what goes on in sweatshops that produce goods for the US market. This film works well as a counterpart to "Greed" or "The Power of the Market."

WHO'S COUNTING (Oley, PA : Bullfrog Films, c1995. 95 minutes). Marilyn Waring discusses how companies and wealthy individuals buy political influence and bias the economy towards things which make them money. Our economic system places no value on untouched natural beauty, meanwhile, smoking, the arms trade and auto accidents all increase GDP. Thus Waring concludes that GDP is unrelated to wellbeing. Instead, we should look at poverty, the environment, access to health care, leisure time, peace, and especially unpaid human work. Women's work is invisible in all cultures, and has no value in our economic system. The World Bank tells poor countries to stop subsistence farming and to produce for export, but in the process, people starve. To Waring, economics is a tool of exploitation of the people in power, used to manipulate society to emphasize purely monetary goals and ignore unmeasurable goods. Excellent feminist perspective on economics. The students find this version of the film a bit long, but a shorter version of this film is now available.

ZONED FOR SLAVERY (Crowing Rooster Arts, 1996. 23 minutes. Distributed by the National Labor Committee: (212) 242-0986). Gripping, low-budget film depicting free trade areas in Latin American LDCs. Countries are engaged in a race to the bottom to see who will accept the lowest wages and poorest working conditions to attract the most foreign investment. Companies in these free trade zones pay absurdly low wages, but the exploitation goes much further. Teenage girls often work 23 hour shifts; they are forced to take birth control pills and they must pay for abortions if they get pregnant. Unions are prohibited, and each company has armed guards. These free trade zones are supported by US AID funds, yet the US is losing out: the US loses jobs and income at home, and doesn't gain a trading partner, since the LDC workers earning \$0.38/hour cannot afford to buy US goods.