

Letter From Thailand

by Harry Nicolaides

The Greening of the Gold Rush

It began innocently enough, like any other workshop—a large university auditorium; speakers from the United Nations, foreign business consortia, and local government; and an obscure member of the Thai royal family ringing an auspicious gong.

However, the hundreds of delegates seated in the auditorium were not savvy investors or scientists but raw-boned, palm-blistered Thai rice farmers, paid and plied with a lavish two-day luncheon and meditation sessions to hear that, if they chose to grow *Jatropha*, they could see profits within 12 months.

They were even offered free bean-sized seeds to start their own plantations and “grow a golden egg that could be passed from father to son to grandson.” However, unlike the fabled Jack who traded his mother’s cow for a handful of magic beans, these impoverished Thai farmers would be giving up a lot more than they bargained.

Much has been written about *Jatropha*, the so-called miracle plant that the *New York Times* recently called the darling of the second-generation biofuels and Goldman Sachs, the world’s largest investment bank, has identified as a promising source of biofuel in the future.

This explains why farmers in China, India, Indonesia, and Africa are being swept up in the rush to grow the *Jatropha curcas* in what can only be compared to the mass hysteria to grow tulips in the Netherlands in the late 17th century—before the speculative bubble burst.

A lot is still unknown about *Jatropha*, however.

A poisonous weed, it can grow al-

most anywhere in many climates, is known to repel insects and animals, and lives for up to 50 years. Cuttings take root quickly and easily. Some say it is a future natural disaster waiting to happen, especially if hybrid strains of the *Jatropha* species outgrow plantations and propagate wildly across farmlands, contaminating soil and displacing native species—and eventually people.

This may sound like pure fantasy—even something out of *The Day of the Triffids*—especially since others claim *Jatropha* is a miracle crop that will relieve poverty and suffering throughout the Third World by allowing the poor to cash in on a low-maintenance crop that grows anywhere.

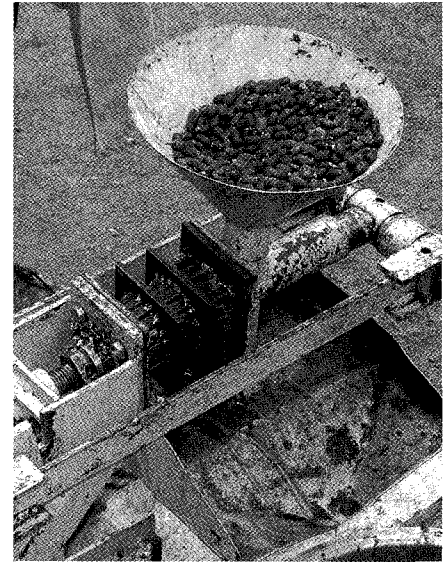
It is widely acknowledged that *Jatropha* can grow in wastelands, sand, and rocky and saline soil; however, there is no evidence that it can produce seeds in these conditions, especially in the longer term. In fact, there have not yet been any published substantive studies into the long-term benefits or effects of farming *Jatropha*.

With corporations currently sizing up *Jatropha* as a socially acceptable biofuel alternative to fossil fuels, what we do hear is the hype of a potentially billion-dollar industry—that is, billions of dollars of savings and profit for corporations and governments.

Air New Zealand, in collaboration with Rolls Royce and Boeing, has announced that by next year it will launch a test flight of a 747 powered by *Jatropha* biofuel.

Phoenix-based Honeywell Aerospace is collaborating with Airbus, Jet-Blue Airways, and others to create a *Jatropha*-based biofuel to reduce costs and increase profitability. The technology was developed from research conducted by the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency to fuel military aircraft.

The military regime of Burma has ordered poor subsistence farmers to stop growing rice, once a major export crop, and to plant *Jatropha* as biofuel for domestic consumption and export.



Harry Nicolaides

In India, the widespread popularity of *Jatropha* farming has taken on such epidemic proportions that many are comparing the phenomenon to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, where townsfolk are subverted by alien imposters grown from plant-like pods.

However, not everyone is blinded by the hyperbole and hysteria. Yahoo internet groups have formed to fight the growing craze and expose the dangers of *Jatropha*. One such group based in India posted an article from the *Hindustan Times* reporting that 50 children were hospitalized after eating the popular *Jatropha* seeds from a plantation near a school.

In Australia, where *Jatropha* is regarded as an invasive weed, cultivation has been banned in two states because it is harmful to livestock, other plants, and people. Reportedly, the ingestion of as few as four small seeds can be fatal.

The virulent characteristics that make the plant such a survivor also make it a noxious weed that can threaten local ecosystems, natural habitats, and established farming communities. *Jatropha* contains the seeds of its own destruction.

In the Philippines, farmers have begun abandoning their *Jatropha* plantations after discovering poor yields and a nonexistent market for seeds.

In East Africa, where *Jatropha* is be-



ing farmed on new biofuel plantations, there is growing concern that it may spread outside of the project areas and invade adjacent farmland, with a devastating impact on the local food chain and natural biodiversity.

In Thailand, the farmers at the workshop were encouraged to plant great swathes of *Jatropha* without being told that there are no trucks, storage facilities, or refineries to process the seeds into oil. This, at a time when the Saudis, short of rice, sent a special business delegation to Thailand

to persuade the Thai government to support a Saudi-Thai joint venture that would see the Saudis renting Thai farmland to grow rice for the sole purpose of exporting the crop back to the Middle East.

More importantly, these farmers, who have toiled on their own land for generations growing rice, would lose something more precious than a few biofuel dollars if they replace traditional food crops with *Jatropha* plants.

With up to 70 percent of all Thais living and working in rural areas outside of Bangkok, rice farming is part of the traditional Thai lifestyle, history, and social system.

Thai language, art, and music reflect the importance and lyrical beauty of bristling, fertile paddies during the wet season. Each year the rice harvest is celebrated by a national festival during which family members all return home, many to Thailand's rural areas.

With rising global food prices—

caused, some say, by the unfettered farming of food crops to produce biofuels—Thai farmers growing rice will always be able to feed themselves. Biofuel profits would only be spent on a new Toyota truck or Honda motorbike, enriching those corporations and impoverishing the Thai farmers who have to run them at today's fuel prices.

And of course there are the risks with farming *Jatropha* on a large commercial scale with little research on the potential problems it may create for people, livestock, other plants, and the environment.

With many of the world's poorest nations teetering on collapse because of rising food prices and civil unrest, many more farmers will be beguiled—and subverted—by biofuel's blue-sky promise before the speculative greening of the gold rush ends.

*Harry Nicolaides is an Australian freelance writer who recently attended a two-day *Jatropha* workshop in Chiang Mai, Thailand.*



Classifying Italy

The neighbor's house sported a *prato inglese* that required ostentatious watering at the crack of dawn, and by the reassuring suppleness of the English lawn beneath our feet we all knew that our host was a gentleman, not some television mogul from Cinecittà out of Rome whom, of a morning, one would be embarrassed to see on the beach in an argument with a Ukrainian girl in tears over a broken promise. No, this was Sabaudia, where Count Volpi di Misurata let me have his summer house for a couple of weeks, and there I was, a foreign body, a foreign nobody really, at the house of the neighbor I had not met, at a party where the lawn was pure William Wordsworth and the drinks plentiful, though not so plentiful, of course, as to cast a vulgar shadow of American-style bonhomie on the host's reputation as a gentleman.

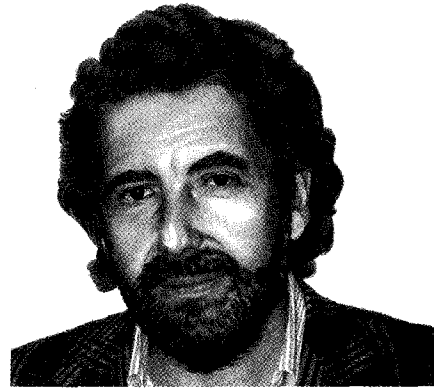
A girl I chatted up seemed susceptible enough, and nearly ten years on I remember my peroration. I had asked her if she'd ever tasted cucumbers with honey. Then it started. "What is it with you Italians," I said. "Why are you always so proper when it comes to social expression? Why is your friendly banter a Russian's idea of what goes on in a mortuary? Why is it that if I come up to an English girl and say, 'Do you come here often?' she will think I'm a moron, but when I come up to you and say, 'Do you like cucumbers with honey?' you think I'm a lunatic? You want me to ask if you come here often, don't you? You crave the reassurance of a cliché, you long for the sweet dulcimer of bourgeois propriety. Have you no intellectual shame? Just look at this parody of a lawn! You insist on gentility you can actually poke at with your toe." Unaccountably, she laughed.

It was only later that I understood why. She was the wife of one of the princes Torlonia, scions of the Roman banking family whose money is still extant and whose papal title is drier than most on the membership roster of the

Circolo della Caccia. Though middle-class by birth, she could afford to laugh at Italian society, middle-class to the marrow of its funny bone. A subsequent turn of fate was still more illuminating. Years later she left her husband and ran off with a penniless photographer friend of mine, a Russian roué who immediately made her pregnant. She has had the child and now lives in a small flat in the center of Rome, discussing life's eventualities with her decorously scandalized parents in Parioli and a Greek chorus of equally respectable girlfriends. She no longer laughs at my tirades. Italian society, for her, is no longer a joke.

There is really only one class in Italy, the middle. From the men in orange repairing a drain just beyond my window in Borgo Vecchio to the cream of local society on the opening night at the Teatro Massimo, everyone is, and is happy being, a bourgeois. "Well, that's Sicily," a scoffer may intervene. Yet I have spent the better part of 20 years in Italy, with residences in Rome, in Florence, in Venice; I have done the writer's tours of duty in Naples, in Sardinia, and in the Dolomites; I have made the idler's forays to the Argentario peninsula, the fancy emerald isles of the Bay, the *aperitivo* terraces of social skiing and climbing; and I can tell you from observation and experience that the scoffer is in all likelihood an Englishman who is thinking of buying a hillside villa in Tuscany.

The Palermo laborer has a green salad with his midday meal. In Venice the longshoreman, eating his lunch in the "Da Marissa" working men's canteen in Tre Archi, will order a plate of fruit before he takes his coffee. In Rome a motorcycle repairman may think his repast incomplete if it has not been followed with a little cheese. Imagine the reaction of the man's social counterparts in Berlin, Chicago, or Manchester, to say nothing of Warsaw or Kiev. Forever thence the full force of peer opprobrium, and phrases like *frigging salad*, *what*



kind of man, and *goddamn faggot* would be his lot wherever he went. His wife would probably leave him: "My mom knew straight off he was kind of weird." The barmaid would titter every time he ordered a beer: "You sure you wouldn't rather a pink lemonade?"

At the upper end of the social spectrum, it is the poverty of the national language that suborns the Italian mind-set, conditioning the aspirant grandee much as the sophistication of the cuisine conditions the most abject of proletarians. Like food, language is a school of life, a straightjacket to spontaneity, a denominator of class and a regulator of conduct. If there is now in Italy a repository of sensibility or attitude not inherently middle class, it is to the vanishing vocabularies of regional dialects one must look to find it.

Standard Italian has reduced communication to an exchange of cartoon bubbles, life to a series of ritualistic actions, thought to a tireless search for the kind of ideas an American newspaper editor would term appropriate. The aristocracy of Europe, historically, valued its independence of mind as it valued its right to bear arms; the lower classes, likewise, were jealous in their defense of what lares and penates had been handed them by their ancestors; only the bourgeoisie, as a newly emergent stratum, was keen to trade individual liberty for the common mean and to exchange tradition for the freedom of trade.

Tomasi di Lampedusa's view of revolution as a dream of the idle has been writ large on modern Italy ever since. That her middle class is the only one in Europe with a distinctively human face is another, longer and happier, story. ☺