

You Create the Society that Destroys You

Fifth Estate Collective

1978

It doesn't take an astute observer to point out that an increasingly important product of our society is death and disease. Neutron bombs, cruise missiles, satellite warfare, radioactive wastes, carcinogenic drinking water, mercury poisoning, chemical plagues, industrially-induced cancers, all are prominent parts of our daily lives.

But as unavoidable as knowledge of these things has come to be, most of them still seem somehow like components of a dream life which is at once real and unreal—after all, who has ever seen a neutron bomb? Who could doubt for a moment, though, that they exist, or that somewhere some quite ordinary man is working on a device which has already rendered the neutron bomb “obsolete”?

But as these things have become fixed in our imaginations, their connection with our everyday reality seems at best tenuous, relegated as they are to the realms of “national” and “international” affairs, where only politicians and “business leaders” tread; it's not always apparent to us that our daily activity is the secret of all of them.

“Working for a living”, we are told, is merely a more sophisticated and productive way of providing ourselves the necessities of life, just as all humans have done since they first appeared on the planet. This is not entirely true, of course, because we all know that the one thing the primitive hunter-gatherer retained that we as wage-workers do not, is autonomy. The hunter-gatherer decided for him or herself what was to be “produced” (subject, of course, to availability) and how it was to be disposed of, and these activities were integrated into all other aspects of hunter-gatherer life.

The moment we enter the workplace, on the other hand, we surrender all meaningful control over our activities for the next eight hours, and suddenly the world of neutron bombs and nerve gases is not just a possibility, but a reality. For not only do we surrender our self-powers at the plant gate, we surrender them to the plant manager, or the corporate head, or the chiefs of socialist state planning, to do with exactly as they see fit. Suddenly, all the productive activity, and the fruits of that activity, of millions of people is concentrated in the hands of a few—and then, literally, anything is possible.

And so with politics and the exercising of our “democratic rights.” The power of a president, or a minister, or a chairman, or a commissar to wage war is exactly equal to the number of people willing to surrender their autonomy to another, to allow another to decide for them the disposal of not just their life-activity, but their lives!

And so it seems to us foolish to complain when a Jimmy Carter promises a reduction in “defense” spending only to raise it 10%, or a Velsicol Corporation puts us to work producing chemicals which destroy our central nervous systems, or a Ford Motor Company uses our labor to construct automobiles which will incinerate us. After all, in our activities every day, in our submission to every form of authority, haven't we told them time and again to do with us as they see fit? So who are we to complain? We're lucky they treat us as well as they do.

On the other hand, though, if we were to stop asking them to do a better job and started acting for ourselves—that would be another matter entirely. That would be a revolution, and that would put them and their society of death out of business.



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