

Eight Theses on Nuclearism

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This special section of the Fifth Estate Newspaper was produced shortly after the April 1979 disastrous events took place at the Three Mile Island Nuclear Plant at Middletown, Pennsylvania.

The first two articles were composed in response to the accident. "Eight Theses on Nuclearism" discusses what confronts us as a species, while "Progress and Nuclear Power" traces the history of the destruction of this continent by industrial technology. The remaining material was compiled from past issues of this newspaper and aptly describes the threat which nuclear power represents in any form.

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1.

The first statement is simultaneously the final word: the question of nuclear power is ultimately not debatable. The history of its development emphatically underlines this self-evident observation.

Nuclear power emerged as a material force without ever having been exposed to debate or examination by those who are affected by it; it is the project of the power companies and the banks, of the military and the government bureaucracy. It originated as a weapon of war, when public exposure would have signaled "espionage" and treason. (Indeed, its victims of just such charges are well known to everyone.)

As nuclearism began to be developed, first in secret, then more publicly, any questioning of its benefits was seen as reactionary "nostalgia" and a blind inability to keep step with the pseudo-progress of capital accumulation. No discussion has ever taken place, only the monologue of advertising and patriotism. "Discussing" the merits or problems of nuclear power with the utility companies and the bureaucracies is analogous to debating the meaning of life with a murderer who has a knife to your throat, or Indians discussing with white settlers the usefulness of the railroads. When the scientists and politicians, as well as their house journalists, "appeal to reason," they are saying, "Shut up, sit down, do as you are told; your lives are irrevocably in our hands."

2.

The question of nuclear power is not debatable because it is not a question of engineering, of geopolitics, of "balance of power," of "proper quality control," or of "consumer input," to be decided on the basis of reasonability

of this or that argument. Life is one thing; sophistry, meaningless jargon and mystification another. Nuclear power is the locus of a configuration of questions facing humanity today which draws every meaningful question into its orbit and which is summed up in the following words: life against death. To be in favor of nuclear power translates into favoring your own annihilation. To oppose nuclear power, whether from “rational” or intuitive reasoning, is to sense the precariousness of the situation today and in some way and to some degree to begin to struggle against the inertia which lists towards destruction. Nuclearism is the death-wish manifest, the beast of the apocalypse, the final solution to human vulnerability. It is the thanatos-medusa which turns everything to stone, the technocrat’s revenge upon uncertainty.

3

Nuclearism is only a part, or perhaps the culmination, of an irrational industrial juggernaut which posits itself as the pinnacle of reason, as the “normal,” natural state of affairs. It is in reality only a logical step in the compulsive and suicidal “conquest of nature” which is the zeitgeist of capital, east and west. From the mechanized, chemical-laden agro-factory system on up, this system tends toward an increasingly dangerous and universalized destruction of diversity—ethnocultural, agricultural and biological. It pulverizes wilderness, wreaks havoc on delicate natural and ecological balance, fills the sacred earthly silence with the white noise of civilization, reduces human community to a degraded riot of social atoms engaged in a deadly and desperate combat for personal survival.

At its inception, capital proclaims the victory of the individual, only to bring about the disappearance of that individual in its twilight. Its subjects sense what they have lost but cannot name it; in its attempts to ameliorate the species-wide anxiety which ensues, capital sets itself the task of transforming the earth for the production of “surrogate” experience—a world of consumable objects, programmed experience and prefabricated “communities.” Thus it goes about undermining the natural environment, obliterating peoples and species which are either useful or useless to it, recklessly poisoning the ecosphere with deadly pollutants and massive injections into the food chain of heavy elements (such as the biphenyls) and radioactivity. It unwittingly signs not only its own death warrant but that of future generations—all in the name of “comfort,” “progress,” “affluence.” Anticipating its own demise as a way of life, it guarantees that nothing will follow. Having obliterated the entire past of human experience, it wishes to obliterate the future.

4.

Because nuclearism is at most the culmination of the industrial system, a protest against nuclear power can only be a starting point which results in the formation of a critique of the system in its entirety. It must become the starting point of a resistance to civilization. In other words, to oppose nuclearism is absurd unless it becomes linked with opposition to the system from which it organically emerged. It means to oppose the factory system, to oppose conglomerate agriculture, to oppose consumerism, to oppose PBB, whaling, steel production, car-culture, pseudo-urbanization, to take none of it for granted, none of it as natural. It means to break from a way of life, to begin to turn the terrain of capital into a terrain of resistance, to reinhabit the earth in an utterly new and radical manner

The “anti-nuclear” liberals who argue that we can live the lifestyle promoted by advertising without nuclear power, using coal, petroleum and other massified forms of industrial technology play into the hands of the utilities. Carter’s lifting of price-ceilings on petroleum at this time reflects a conscious political attempt to convince a consumption-addicted public that it must accept nuclear power if it wants to go on living—suicidally—as it has. (This psychology works just as well on the poorer sectors who, without having received the bill of goods of affluence, have nevertheless been sold on the illusions and expectations of it. At a time when even this false affluence is deteriorating under the lash of inflation and the collapse of services, this outlook represents nothing more than desperation.)

5.

The modern industrial system of capital accumulation, based as it is on the out-and-out looting of nature and humanity for the purposes of profit and power, can only take place within the nexus of passivity and domination. It can only take place in an arena in which the rebels have been exterminated and the great mass of people have been disenfranchised, robbed of tools and land, turned into slaves and proletarians. It begins with violent coercion and culminates in hypnotic suggestion. It ends in the kind of passivity which is reflected in the words of a man living near the Three Mile Island plant who was interviewed by the national news. He claimed to be unconcerned with the proximity of the radiation leakage, and in perfect duck-speak direct from the larynx, announced faith in the experts and faith in his leaders, adding that, as far as the possibility of death and injury were concerned, “You gotta go sometime.” (Is he rehearsing that line for his children when it is discovered some years from now that they are dying of leukemia?)

The industrial system could not survive without the passive cooperation of human beings who trust and obey their leaders, who have faith in the mystical newspeak of experts, who accept at face value every step of technological progress unleashed upon them by government and corporate bureaucracies as quite naturally an enrichment of their already impoverished lives, who have conformed anxiously to the pathology of normalcy and who look at non-conformists, critics and rebels against the society as anachronistic and subversive troublemakers—these people are characterologically incapable of living autonomously, of making decisions, of examining critically themselves and their society.

They have been domesticated; their minds have been colonized. They do not realize that when government spokesmen quack on about taking “necessary risks,” that it is their lives and the lives of their children and descendants which are being risked. They have abdicated responsibility for themselves. Hence everything they utter is the result of hypnotic suggestion, of covert coercion; they speak only the litanies of their leaders. Perhaps only the greatest of catastrophes can make them see—or perhaps they are already lost. They compel the uneasy feeling that if we do not begin to take action immediately, that “life as we know it” will disappear altogether in the next twenty years and the life as it will be lived then will not be worth defending.

6.

Despite what the liberal and leftist politicians who associate with the anti-nuclear movement say, nuclearism is in no way reformable. A massified, bureaucratic technology spells out not only the necessity of totalitarian rule, but the inevitability of disaster. Nuclearism demands an antagonistic society founded upon class division—whereby one group commands authority for itself. This group may represent a class in the classical sense, such as the bourgeoisie in the west, or a party or bureaucratic formation in another case. It could even be made up of a “party of expertise,” through which a powerful technocracy blackmails all of society with nuclear destruction or breakdown.

Arguments for “economic democracy” and the call for a Leninist conception of socialist revolution aside, nuclear technology and weaponry, due to the dangers involved, the necessity of extreme levels of specialization and expertise, and the subsequent bureaucratization of all levels from research to the transport of radioactive wastes, render decentralized, democratic decision-making impossible. Whether or not “Islamic republicans,” fascists, liberal capitalist bureaucrats or state socialist politicians make the decisions, the results are the same: poisoning the environment and the somatic and genetic destruction of the human race.

The inevitability of catastrophe is also self-evident. Nuclearism can only be a function of bureaucracy, which necessitates the possibility—through negligence, simple human error, or sabotage—of disaster. No matter how enlightened the despotism, nuclear disaster would result from the division of labor, since even the most well-meaning of engineers tend to cling stubbornly to bankrupt systems in which they have personally invested time and professional and moral energy. Socialist “planning,” “economic democracy,” and the like schemata are only euphemisms for the domination of scientific-political bureaucracy, which, given the nature of nuclearism, in relation to society must become totalitarian, and which, as Weber’s “iron law of oligarchy” demonstrates, tends to move away from its original purpose for organization in the pursuit of the maintenance and self-aggrandizement of its members.

When politicians of Leninist, socialist and liberal stripes say that they can solve the impossible through the implementation of their program or the coming to power of their party, they are saying simply, "Give us the power. Let us continue the project of capital instead of finding a way of reorganizing life along humane lines for yourselves." Nuclearism in the state socialist tyrannies reveals all too clearly that they are part of the same process of domination and capital accumulation which led to nuclearism in the west.

7.

Nuclearism grew out of war and cannot be separated from the accumulation of nuclear weapons by nation states and its unavoidable progression towards more war. Any resistance to nuclearism which does not make resistance to nuclear arms central to its movement is pointless. But to demand nuclear disarmament in the face of widespread proliferation of nuclear weapons, without seeing that the assault must lead to war against the state itself, is to defy reason. Again, as with the question of industrial technology and of domination and passivity, one begins with a single, isolated aspect of the problem and ends with the overwhelming totality: opposition to nuclearism must lead to opposition to the military which must end in radical opposition to the state. The call to oppose nuclearism must become linked to the demands of dismemberment of the armies and states which control it. Within a very few years, scores of nation states will be in possession of nuclear technology, making nuclear war the next stage in local wars and building towards generalized thermonuclear world war. Hence, the anti-nuclear movement cannot and must not avoid becoming an anti-war movement *in opposition to World War III*. But this movement, here in the U.S. and everywhere, must go on to challenge the state. A call for the abolition of nuclearism must ultimately become a call to insurrection. Halfway measures will only end in defeat, the victory of nuclearism, and the inevitability of military nuclear holocaust.

8.

Each day that it continues to exist, nuclearism—as well as other noxious forms of industrialism—makes libertarian revolution and the reemergence of human community less and less possible. It has made us irrevocably dependent upon experts, for example, because it cannot be dismantled except by experts. Thus even in the struggle against nuclearism, the overwhelming problem of post-revolutionary deconstruction contains the seed of authoritarianism and centralized control. Not only the problem of dismantling the technology, but the more far-reaching dilemma of containing the already present nuclear and industrial wastes (and the wastes which are being produced today as this is being written and tomorrow as it is being read) makes the urgency of stopping it as soon as possible ever greater.

Admittedly, these assertions sound like "all or nothingism." The problem of nuclearism, tied as it is to a constellation of life-or-death questions which demand the most radical and perhaps utopian of resolutions, seems almost insurmountable. But we must begin to confront them, for to do anything else is to surrender to a fatal inertia. However remote the possibility of overturning this state of affairs may seem to us today, we can only begin with a first step. Tomorrow it may be too late and the nuclearization may be irreversible. If nothing else, this sense of urgency must sustain us.



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