

Mexican Oil Spill Disaster

Industrial Plague Widens

Primitivo Solis (David Watson)

1979

The gruesome tailspin of industrialism continues unabated in every sphere. Industrial society is at a malignant stage of decline with events like the Ixtoc 1 oil disaster providing all the more evidence of its impending collapse.

The oil spill, caused by the explosion of an exploratory well drilled by Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex), the national state-controlled oil company of Mexico, began spewing oil into the Gulf on June 3 at the rate of 4,500 tons a day, some 500 miles south of Texas off the coast of the state of Campeche.

Efforts by Mexican (and later international) engineers to throttle the flow cut it back to some 3,000 tons a day. But it has continued to pump oil into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico to date, making it easily the worst oil disaster in history, surpassing the record reached in July when two supertankers collided and broke up in the Caribbean near Tobago and Trinidad.

The oil eventually formed a slick ninety miles wide and hundreds of miles long affecting coastal waters up the Mexican and Texan coasts. It also has mixed with sea water and frothed into ribbons resembling what commentators have described as chocolate mousse and pancakes, sometimes dispersing, and other times sinking below the surface, making detection along Gulf currents extremely difficult. Cyclones during the stormy season managed to disperse the oil even more widely.

On August 5 the Mexican government authorized U. S. participation in the process of containing the spill. This project immediately became a lucrative business for several U.S. firms. Other companies are sure to make money studying the short-and-long-range effects of the catastrophe. A cursory inventory of the consequences includes the potential destruction of the Mexican and U.S. fishing and shellfish industries in the Gulf. Wildlife preserves and coastal estuaries are threatened by the spreading oil. Shrimp, oysters, and crabs will be destroyed and their breeding grounds wiped out.

Contaminated shellfish which are harvested will enter into the food chain and endanger human health. Such birds as the peregrine falcon, the whooping crane, the redhead duck, and the brown pelican will be threatened. Beach areas will be ruined.

The University of Mexico's laboratory of marine ecology predicted that it would take at least ten years for the Gulf to recover. Meanwhile, the breeding grounds for shell fish for the entire Gulf Stream are being destroyed, and the effects are ultimately bound to be felt everywhere.

Even the weather may be altered, according to some scientists. The oil spill already covers approximately two percent of the surface of the Gulf of Mexico, and is likely to alter the water evaporation rates, which dictate most of the rainfall west of the Rocky Mountains to the Eastern seaboard.

According to a *Detroit News* article, scientists are concerned that "a major oil cover in the Gulf...could reduce rainfall over major farm and population areas in the Great Plains, Midwest, Great Lakes basin, Mississippi Valley, Gulf Coast, the Appalachians and the East Coast." Many scientists have scoffed at the possibility of what one journalist dubbed a "new Dustbowl for the Midwest," but ultimately, none is sure of the consequences.

Ecological Balance Upset

As is always the case with modern industrialism, the attempt to rectify its calamities invariably creates even greater problems. The strategies and technologies used to combat the spreading oil are a case in point. The chemical agents being used to disperse the oil upset delicate ecological balances probably as much as the oil slicks themselves. And even though specialists predict that the flow of oil will be stopped in October or November (!), ocean currents and the unusual behavior of this particular slick insure that it will have a major impact for an indefinite period of time. The director of the University of Texas Marine Science Institute was quoted by *Time* Magazine (August 20, 1979): "The oil sinks and then comes back up. It's going to be a long term problem." Said another scientist, "We have never seen anything like it. There is no engineering solution."

The issues in the Ixtoc spill have been easily obscured by anti-Mexican jingoism. Mexico was blamed for incompetence, for stubbornly refusing U.S. assistance in stopping the spill, and for ignoring the protests and damage claims of Texas. The Attorney General of the State of Texas announced that a lawsuit was being planned against Mexico.

On the other hand, leftists have been quick to point out that oil-exploration is in many cases under the control of racist, gringo companies which have been contracted by the Mexican government and which suffer the usual level of incompetence, neglect and cover-up that corporations do everywhere. The indignation of north Americans against a neighboring colony which has been systematically invaded, looted and exploited by the United States need not even be given an iota of serious consideration.

Mexico has no monopoly on disasters. It is not even a question of private ownership (since Mexican oil is nationalized) or national autarky (petroleum technology being international). Oil spills will continue to take place everywhere, under the auspices of private, mixed, or state capital.

The problem is not who or what party happens to be in power but the ideology of development which in the West takes place under the aegis of private development and which in the Third World takes place under a mixture of socialist, Islamic, and nationalist mystifications.

Just as nuclear "accidents" are built into that system of technology, oil spills are an integral part of oil drilling and exploration. This is why engineers calculate probability statistics for failure in every system that they design.

Human error, metal fatigue, miscalculation, freak interventions of nature—all and any of these possibilities render breakdowns in such a technological system not only possible, but inevitable. Socialist technicians or private corporate technicians will not make the difference. Nor will this or that brand of machinery; nor will its having been produced by wage labor in the East or the West. The increasing complexity of the system, its dependence on more and more diverse factors for its success, only guarantee its ultimate breakdown.

We have not even begun to sense the long-range effects of these massive oil spills. It is certainly not reassuring to hear from oceanographer and explorer Thor Heyerdahl that on his 1970 Ra II expedition, "We found solidified oil clots 43 days out of the 57 days it took to cross the Atlantic, from Africa to Barbados." (in the *World Environment Report*)

There are already 1,000 oil-producing wells in the U.S Gulf. At this time, there are only sixteen oil platforms in Mexican waters, but Pemex announced at the time of the accident that 500 more are planned.

The silence of the anti-nuclear movement on this massive, destructive oil disaster can only reflect a complicity on their part with the project of capital. The massification of energy production can only assure the collapse of natural ecosystems and the eventual annihilation of human life. The anti-nuclear activists who argue petroleum over atoms are sacrificing their right eye to save their left. Oil is as much a plague as nuclearism and must be halted altogether.

Industrial plagues come in waves, spelling doom first for that animal species, this ecological center, that human population. The liberals and their dupes, in a single-issue frenzy, obfuscating by synecdoche the crisis of industrialism in its entirety, resemble looters in a city quarantined with plague: they will succumb wrapped in fine linen.

"It is impossible for anybody to be a prophet and say whether it will take ten years or fifty years before there is a disaster," said Heyerdahl in the report mentioned above. "But you don't have to be a prophet to say that sooner or later even the ocean cannot absorb everything that we send into it."

Three Mile Island or the Ixtoc 1 Oil Disaster: which is worse? We will let the liberals argue the fine points of megadeath. For us the disasters are moments within the same process.

fifth Estate

Primitivo Solis (David Watson)
Mexican Oil Spill Disaster
Industrial Plague Widens
1979

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/299-october-22-1979/mexican-oil-spill-disaster>
Fifth Estate #299, October 22, 1979

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)