

The Euromissile Demonstrations & The Fate of the Earth

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When millions of people fill the streets of Europe to protest the nuclear arms race, as occurred the weekend of October 22, 1983, only those most pessimistic about our prospects will fail to sit up and take notice. Whatever their shortcomings, the massive demonstrations against the installation of cruise and Pershing II missiles on European soil are an indication that human beings have not completely succumbed to the death instinct. And despite the fact that the demonstrators have failed in their objective to halt the Euromissiles, it is arguable that they will continue undeterred, and in perhaps more creative ways, to oppose the nuclear state.

Unlike our future prospects, the outcome of the Euromissile protests was predictable. The industrial state is deeply and perhaps irrevocably committed to the preparation of war, if not war itself, as a solution to its manifold contradictions. While it may be willing to concede certain details in order to create the illusion that it favors disarmament (e.g. the support for a nuclear freeze by members of the Democratic Party in the U.S.—the same people who never cease to call for a strong military defense), the accumulation of weapons of mass destruction continues at an unprecedented pace.

In fact, the demonstrators' focus on nuclear war is an inadequate response to this massive arms build up. As Michael T. Klare points out in a recent issue of *The Nation* magazine, conventional weaponry, including the new breed of "near nuclear" weapons, has attained such a level of destructiveness as to blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear war. (Thus some military experts argue that it is irrational to fear the use of battlefield nuclear weapons, since conventional weapons would wreak such destruction that nukes would not be a significantly more destructive force.) Likewise, the renewed mass production of chemical and biological weapons, as well as the commitment of billions of dollars to new weapons research, and development (such as killer satellites, particle beam weapons, and other such exotica) testify to the warmakers' genocidal frenzy. Only the politically and morally blind could fail to read the signposts ahead.

Although the demand of the demonstrators for a nuclear free Europe is manifestly reasonable and inoffensive, every indication is that the missiles are going to be installed anyway. Only the most naive of the demonstrators could have imagined that their protests could have more than a negligible effect on the race toward extermination. Recognizing the intransigence of the state, Rudolf Bahro, German Green Party member and anti-nuclear activist, observed before the demonstrations that after October, "the peace movement as an anti-missile movement will be finished." Perhaps now many of the protesters will realize as Bahro has that the movement must seek a new direction.

War against the Ecosystem

There are those who would argue that while capitalism uses the threat of nuclear war to command loyalty and obedience, it would derive no benefit from an actual nuclear war, so it can be ruled out as a threat. Therefore, protest against nuclear war merely diverts us from assaulting the foundations of our alienation.

In spite of its surface plausibility, this argument misses the point. Those who perceive capitalism solely in terms of its surface rationality forget that in fact, the ascendancy of a deranged instrumental rationality is the triumph of the irrational in civilized disguise: autistic schizoids frenziedly combining and recombining elements of their environment, control freaks creating haywire Frankensteins that crush the flower of life in their attempts to embrace it.

The exterminist war machine is merely the tip of an iceberg; beneath the surface, the exterminist industrial system is quietly digging our graves. It takes only a minimal exercise of the imagination to see that the human and ecological consequences of a nuclear war are only a concentrated, accelerated instance of the ecological catastrophe slowly accumulating as the result of industrial society's "normal operations." (Indeed, the mere accumulation of (unexploded) nuclear warheads is part of a supremely destructive process: Scientists continue to debate how and where to store the millions of tons of high level nuclear wastes that have accumulated over the past 40 years. These by-products of nuclear reactors and weapons tests will have to be stored in containers impervious to leakage for hundreds of thousands, even millions of years—thus suggesting a new meaning to the word hubris.)

None of this is a revelation; in fact, anyone with a TV set or a subscription to a daily newspaper has some awareness of the gathering ecological apocalypse. It's likely, therefore, that the willingness of large numbers of ordinary people to participate in the Euromissile demonstrations is due in part to their growing anxiety about the fate of the earth, a dawning awareness that something must be done, and soon. Without really knowing what to do, even doubtful that anything can be done, people nevertheless feel the existential need to physically oppose themselves to the nuclear juggernaut.

For others, hatred of this society has become palpable. Whether squatters in Amsterdam, shanty-town dwellers blocking the expansion of a German airport, or rioters in Brixton—a way of death has become intolerable. Significant numbers share Rudolf Bahro's conviction that we must "break with civilization and the concept of progress"; for them, it has become necessary and desirable to try and live differently. Unlike their predecessors in the U.S., many of these participants in a nascent oppositional culture perceive with growing sophistication the connection between their daily misery and the miserable social ensemble—a connection that becomes more discernible, more obvious, with each passing moment.

This is not to deny that these various movements have their shortcomings, or that there are not traps waiting to be sprung on the unwary. The history of radical social movements demonstrates their vulnerability to various recuperations. Yet the lines are clearly drawn, between a society strangling on its own effluents and a vision of people living in harmony with each other and in cooperation with the rest of nature. When the question is posed starkly, a choice can be made.



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