

The American Dream

A Synthetic Society

Fifth Estate Collective

1986

“Plastic settled in river

“SARNIA, Ontario—A cloud of plastic powder that was released into the air and settled in the St. Clair River poses no health threat, says a Canadian spokesman for the Midland-based Dow Chemical Co.

“The estimated 4,000 pounds of the polyethylene powder used to make milk jugs accidentally was released by the company about 10 p.m. Thursday, Dow Chemical Canada Inc. spokesman John Musser said Friday.

“‘We didn’t recover anything’ from the river, Musser said. ‘It’s an indicator of how little actually got in the river.’

“Thursday’s spill was at least the fifth this year and the first reported since March 3, when Dow’s Canadian subsidiary announced new training programs aimed at preventing spills at the Sarnia plant.”

The above article from the fifth page of the second section of Sunday’s *Free Press* relates an almost daily event, a banal mistake, a routine accident. And it relates it in a way that satisfies and placates the unquestioning reader. It begins with the Dow Chemical spokesman’s assurance that the 4000 pound plastic spill “poses no health threat,” and it ends by reminding us that Dow Chemical has a training program that attempts to prevent such spills. But the terrifying details are all there in between the assurances of experts that all is under control. This is at least the fifth such spill for Dow this year. How many other chemical companies are there with similar track records? How many “accidents” are there?

According to the *New York Times* (Oct. 3, 1985), an incomplete governmental study of several states commissioned by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of toxic chemical accidents states that at least 6,928 accidents have occurred in the U.S. in the last five years, resulting, so far, in 135 deaths and 15,000 injuries. During this time 420 million pounds of chemicals have been accidentally spilled into the earth or water or emitted into the atmosphere. If the entire country had been included in this report, these figures would be two to three times higher, according to one of the study’s consultants. The causes of the accidents are listed as storage tank failure, valve problems, and human error.

This governmental study was initiated in response to the Bhopal disaster, and studies have always been the official response to public concern and outrage. An insidious bureaucracy made up of control, research and protection agencies has parasitically affixed itself to the slippery flanks of the huge industrial complex which sustains this petro-chemical-based society. The tactic is obvious—people become accustomed to reading these shocking (though often partial, incomplete or inaccurate) “official” statistics and are left with the feeling that something

is being done about a terrible situation. But clearly we need no more studies to realize that the entire system of industrialization is responsible for killing our environment, our wildlife, ourselves.

While we become more aware of the direct and blatant threat posed by the huge waste burning plant planned for our neighborhood, we should be making some crucial connections between the business of disposal and the business of production.

It is this system which has created the terms of our existence and now of our survival. It assures us, for example, that we need nuclear power and nuclear arms, just as it assumes that war is a “necessary evil” and a “reality” of our modern age. It tells us that we need plastics (products we didn’t even know about 25 years ago). We need materials that create deadly toxins both in their production and their disposal. We then need land-fill and incinerators, and now we need incinerators that need waste to create energy that we need to keep this monstrous machine running.

To suggest that we dismantle this system of production seems “unrealistic,” “impractical,” and “absurd.” Yet this is precisely what we must suggest if we are to salvage our earth and recover our humanity.

A very lethal chain of events has been created that has tied us into its insane progression. This is “crackpot realism”—the lunatic step by step pragmatism of specialists leading us toward catastrophe—at its most pernicious, and minimally we should recognize its both subtle and glaring control over our daily lives. Let us not rely on the quick techno-fix, shortsighted mentality of bureaucrats, technicians, and corporate spokespeople. Our blind acceptance of their solutions and our willing allegiance to their myopic “expertise” have left us with a tainted and noxious world, a plastic civilization, which depends on our passive compliance for its perpetuation.

The above article is reprinted from the tabloid published by Cass Corridor residents to agitate against the construction of Detroit’s trash-to-energy incinerator. They can be contacted c/o P.O. Box 02455, Detroit MI 48202.

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