

# Cheerleaders for the Plague

George Bradford (David Watson)

In his letter, “Miss” Ann Thropy [this issue, FE #331, Spring, 1989] writes that it was his article celebrating AIDS that generated the criticisms of Earth First! and deep ecology. Even though his claim drastically simplifies the reasons for our critiques, it is undeniable that cheerleading epidemics is what earned him his notoriety. If his original AIDS article (“Population and AIDS,” Beltane 1987 *EF! Journal*) could have been dismissed as a sick joke, the same cannot be said about articles that have since appeared in the *EF! Journal* with a more developed, ostensibly scientific, argument. One in particular, “Is AIDS the Answer to an Environmentalist’s Prayer?” by Daniel Conner (Yule 1987 *EF! Journal*) describes the virus as a kind of Gaia’s revenge (Gaia being the name given the concept of a superorganism which is the entire Earth). Since population pressure “lies at the root of every environmental problem we face,” he argues, starting predictably from a Malthusian position, AIDS may be the answer to any “thoughtful” environmentalist’s prayer. If prayer is the key word in this argument, there is a reason; it borders on being pure religion.

After some speculation and historical discussion of epidemics and infectious disease, Conner gets to the point: pandemics are probably not random, he muses, “but rather are ‘directed’ by a source at a level below that of Deity.” The source is Gaia, though he tries to qualify his argument by saying that this superorganism probably “accomplishes the directional ‘push’ by natural selection and cybernetic feedback mechanisms rather than by supernatural means...If the surface of Earth in some circumstances behaves like a living entity, then it may also have the capacity to defend itself from internal cancers.” Conner apparently thinks that the means by which the organism accomplishes its “directed activity” clears up the supernatural problem, but one can see here the mixture of religion and reductionist science that has characterized some of the problems of DE from the beginning.

Seeking ways to describe this directional “push,” Conner quotes James Lovelock, an originator of the Gaia thesis, who uses a weird police metaphor to point to “an intricate security system to ensure that exotic outlaw species do not evolve into rampantly criminal syndicates.” Then comes a dash of Parson Malthus for good measure: Conner argues, “When economic checks on overpopulation, such as food supply, fail to stop growth because the efflorescing organism has learned to generate its own food supply, then Gaia may resort to extraordinary measures [a kind of martial law?] to assert balance.” Here the sad environmental philosopher has transformed a lovely image of the living Earth into a kind of dismal, biological Pinochet. But it is important to his argument; if overpopulation is to be attacked, disease from mutated microbes must be “‘directed,’ rather than random or ‘undirected’ as most scientists suppose.”

No environmentalist, concludes Conner, “could have invented a better ‘cure’” for this “human cancer” than AIDS, and he wonders what could have brought about the powerful response—the ozone collapse, perhaps, or deforestation, or even the threat of nuclear winter. “Here, of course, we touch upon the realm of the metaphysical, where no final answers are possible.” Indeed.

This material had already appeared and been widely read when DE defenders were dismissing criticism of the Miss Ann Thropy article as an inability on the part of critics to appreciate outrageous, tongue-in-cheek satire a la Swift. It was also in print when Kirkpatrick Sale wrote his whitewash of DE in the May 14, 1988 issue of *The Nation*.

“Nowhere [in DE] is there the idea that it’s desirable or inevitable—or even useful, in biospheric terms—for poor people to die off; quite the contrary.” The idea that AIDS is a “welcome development,” he wrote, like Foreman’s argument that Ethiopian tribespeople should be left to starve for nature to follow its course, is “meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive—to suggest that the earth as a living ecosystem might have its own defense mechanisms, including viruses that strike at species that overstress it, to protect it in times of crisis.”

If a radical environmental movement is to grow and deepen its understanding of (and thus its response to) the global crisis we face, this kind of religious stupidity will have to soon be overcome. A descriptive, rather than prescriptive, discussion of AIDS would hardly go seeking avenging angels. If the virus is not a “designer disease” that has accidentally (or purposely) been released from the biowar labs (see the Spring 1988 FE for an article on this not implausible thesis [“Was Malthus Right? An Exchange on Deep Ecology and Population,” FE #328, Spring, 1988]), and if it is not simply a random viral predator produced by nature’s genetic game of dice, then what is it?

To think that Gaia has taken aim against the species in response to pollution or to a potential threat (say, of nuclear winter) is environmental discourse on the level of the born-again christian beliefs that AIDS is the wages of sin. AIDS is a reflection of a biological opportunism on the part of viruses whose other side is the current deterioration and breakdown of human beings’ immune systems. Is Gaia striking at us in this way? Then how poor is her aim! She’s killed half the bottle-nose dolphins in-the waters off the U.S. east coast in the last year, and perhaps two thirds of the seals in the North Sea, with similar developments! Sugar Maples, their defenses wracked by acid rain and changing weather, are dying en masse in eastern North America, in many cases succumbing to predators and parasites against which they once had immunities. Other species are threatened for the same reason because their immune systems are damaged by industrialism.

In other words, people may be getting sick for the same reason that other species are: industrialism is poisoning them. Massive exposure to antibiotics, pesticides, toxic chemicals and nuclear contamination is slowly undoing our immunal defenses, and viral predators step in when and where they can set up housekeeping. Evolutionary opportunism is a fundamental fact of life. Again, a symptom of the disease killing life as we know it is passed off as a solution by a DE argument. So let’s cheer on the symptoms—Gaia may be sick of the entire mammalian line (since we’re all family) so perhaps she’s getting rid of us all. We’re in the Age of Insects, anyway, so maybe it is their turn. This makes great bar-room chatter, but it so approaches a dada metaphysics that it mystifies the social and historical aspects of the disease.

Does this mean that we surrender to the arguments of the medical technocracy that bioengineering is now our only salvation from the plagues unleashed by mass technics itself? A few months ago I received a card from J. Safranek, a reader in California, who wrote: “If anarchists are interested in finding a treatment for AIDS instead of using AIDS as a treatment for ‘over-population’—a la EF!—then the use of biotechnology now (yes, even by these bastard, venture capitalist, high tech tabs) is crucial to the discovery and manufacture of antibodies, etc., and the saving of lives.” Quoting a line in my original essay against biotechnology, Safranek continues, “This ‘destructive meddling into the fundamental structures of nature’ can and must be constructive if the world-wide sufferers of AIDS are to ever have an attitude.”

I have no confidence in medical biotechnology or its “promise,” so I cannot agree with Safranek or that line of thinking. The monsters that genetic engineering will unleash are far more terrifying than the deadliest plague. Ultimately, high tech medicine works on the same principle as pesticides—in evolutionary terms, selecting for stronger, more virulent “pests.” We may be better off learning to live with many of our predators. Even Conner’s point is valid when he quotes Robert Gallo, a researcher who isolated the AIDS virus early on: “In the past two decades one of the fondest boasts of medical science has been the conquest of infectious diseases, at least in the wealthy countries of the industrialized world,” he writes. “The advent of retroviruses with the capacity to cause extraordinarily complex and devastating disease has exposed the claim for what it was: hubris. Nature is never truly conquered...Indeed, perhaps conquest is the wrong metaphor to describe our relation to nature, which not only surrounds but in the deepest sense also constitutes our being.”

It is interesting that Conner and Safranek seem to share the view that medicine’s response to infectious diseases is what curtailed them, even if Conner believes that this has only forestalled or caused their mutation. But medical science’s claim to have defeated plagues is not necessarily entirely the case. In his provocative book *Medical Nemesis* Ivan Illich writes, “The study of the evolution of disease patterns provides evidence that during the last century

doctors have affected epidemics no more profoundly than did priests during earlier times. Epidemics came and went, imprecated by both but touched by neither.”

Illich discusses tuberculosis as an example, arguing that it “reached a peak over two generations. In New York in 1812, the death rate was estimated to be higher than 700 per 10,000; by 1882, when Koch first isolated and cultured the bacillus, it had already declined to 370 per 10,000. The rate was down to 180 when the first sanitarium was opened in 1910, even though ‘consumption’ still held second place in the mortality tables. After World War II, but before antibiotics became routine, it had slipped into eleventh place with a rate of 48.” Tuberculosis is not the only example. “Cholera, dysentery, and typhoid similarly peaked and dwindled outside the physician’s control. By the time their etiology was understood and their therapy had become specific, these diseases had lost much of their virulence and hence their social importance. The combined death rate from scarlet fever, diphtheria, whooping cough, and measles among children up to fifteen shows that nearly 90 percent of the total decline in mortality between 1860 and 1965 had occurred before the introduction of antibiotics and widespread immunization.” The reason for this was mainly better nutrition. “For more than a century,” Illich writes, “an analysis of disease trends has shown that the environment is the primary determinant of the state of general health of any population.” (pages 15–18) What is also certain is that the diseases that we see spreading today are also the result of environmental factors. The one in every two people that will suffer from cancer by the end of this century can generally assume that a major cause of disease is the industrial civilization that promised to conquer disease and death and which instead has made new diseases and poisoned the entire life support system of the planet.

The ideology surrounding the medical technology is central to industrialism’s religious belief system, but it has only served to alienate people further from their own death as much as they are alienated from their life. Death, like other natural processes such as birth, growth and aging, has been technicized and instrumentalized, and finally captured by the megamachine and its bureaucracy. As Illich writes, “Medicine undermines health not only through direct aggression against individuals but also through the impact of its social organization on the total milieu... Life is thus reduced to a ‘span,’ to a statistical phenomenon which, for better or worse, must be institutionally planned and shaped. This life-span is brought into existence with the pre-natal check-up, when the doctor decides if and how the fetus shall be born, and it will end with a mark on a chart ordering resuscitation suspended. Between delivery and termination this bundle of biomedical care fits best into a city that is built like a mechanical womb.” (pages 40, 78–79)

None of this is to say that we should welcome the total collapse of all and every medical technique. Healing, like birth control and an ecological agriculture, is a relatively low tech constellation of simple tools and techniques and social interactions. As I wrote in my original essay on DE, “Medicalization and its promise of overcoming death leads directly to bioengineering and the undermining and restructuring of human beings, which will bring us either to medico-technological catastrophe which wipes everything out, or an engineered *Brave New World*... The few short-term benefits that medical high technology brings are outweighed by its long-term deleterious effects on nature and on human health.”

In my introduction to Tomas MacSheoin’s essay on biotechnology “In the Image of Capital: The Rise of Biotechnology” [FE #320, Spring 1985] I wrote, “What the Great Chain of Being was for the medieval society, and the clockwork universe was for the mechanical-industrial revolution, the genetic code, the clone, the molecular cell, and the simulacrum are for this brave new world which threatens us today. MacSheoin describes the invasion by capital into the final domain—the fundamental structures of life. What he finds is not reassuring—the conquest of all forms of life by technocratic capital, the dangerous homogenization which will usher in ‘total control,’ and subsequently, the inevitable collapse of life systems on this planet. Once more the enemy hides behind a ‘humane’ cloak—this time not religious salvation, nor progress, nor democracy, but the conquest of disease and famine—those two apocalyptic nags introduced, on a scale never before realized, by capital itself...” Hence it will be “good technology,” as the true believers might put it, and not “bad technology” at all, which destroys us.

The response to medicalization is not a simple one, and I do not offer simple answers. It is not a question of abruptly abandoning all medicine and “letting nature take its course,” as eco-catastrophist Dave Foreman—who hightailed it to the nearest high tech hospital when he was recently bitten by a deadly recluse spider—might have it. (See the Samhain 1988 EF! Journal. This is the fellow who counsels that others should be left to die for the sake of the Earth.) What Langdon Winner has described (in his book *Autonomous Technology*) as “epistemological Luddism,” a

deconstruction of mass technics as a process of inquiry and social practice, seems to be a fruitful beginning. There will be no easy answers to any aspect of the crisis we face.

Industrialism has guaranteed that many of us will sicken and die as our planet is more and more poisoned and disrupted. The promise the institutions of industrial technology offer of saving us from the consequences of such disruptions is only a tightening of the ratchet of industrial megadeath. We are better off beginning the process of deconstruction now, rather than staying with its “deferred payment plan” and its hidden costs. But let us refrain from cheerleading the epidemics probably caused by the civilization we oppose. We will find, as pessimist skeptic E.M. Cioran has written, that “Our pleasure in foreseeing a catastrophe diminishes as the catastrophe approaches and ceases altogether once it is upon us.” (*The New Gods*, page 111)



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