

# Earth Day?

## **We Want a Festival of the Oppressed! The Solution to Pollution is Revolution**

Lewis Cannon

1990

Earth Day supplement page 1

### **1. Earth's Day or Capital's Spectacle?**

If there was ever a need for an “Earth Day,” “Earth Week,” or “Earth Year” “to get people thinking creatively about the problems we now confront, and looking for new ways to tackle them,” in the words of Earth Day 1970 organizer (and Earth Day 1990 CEO) Denis Hayes, now is certainly the time.

Twenty years after the original Earth Day demonstrations in April 1970, the ecological crisis is far more grave, with major organs of the living ecosphere apparently taking a rapid slide downhill. Now everyone is climbing on the bandwagon—not only the suckers but the confidence men, the victims as well as the executioners, the contaminated communities and the powerful institutions that profit from their contamination. Hands across America, everybody, let's save the Earth; and if we can do it by satellite hookup with corporate sponsorship, well, all the better.

Everyone wants a piece of Hayes's “outpouring of public concern,” concern being one of those low-overhead factors of continuing production that make such good corporate publicity. Big oil wants a piece of the action, and the politicians, and the Utilities—even the Pentagon must be scheming up an announcement for an “Earth-friendly” war. Every company and promoter with something to sell is giving an Earth Day spin to the sales pitch. The environment is in. Yet somehow the contamination and plunder are accelerating even as the noise about saving the planet is becoming loudest.

Whose Day? Whose Earth? Do the military-industrial-financial ghouls at Death's control panel think that by donating a few trees to be planted on wasted soils they can postpone the inevitable breakdown of their crumbling megamachine? One is reminded of the Puritan sabbath, when the land-grabbers, Indian-killers and witch-burners contemplated the pieties of their saviour in whose name they perpetrated their slaughters. Once April 22 passes, the show will end, and that holocaust of holocausts, the normal state of affairs and its corresponding affairs of state will resume, full steam ahead.

No kidding: there is a profound biocrisis occurring. It isn't radicals who are sounding the alarm about this crisis, but mainstream scientists. Industrialism has now caused some five holes in the ozone layer in the Earth's upper atmosphere and is heating up the planet in unprecedented ways, the results of which can only be guessed.

Then there is destruction of habitat for the Earth's species, in fact of entire planetary organs. The rainforests are being lost at the rate of some 100 acres a minute, and will disappear by early in the next century. (That is to say, they will be disappeared, as the victims of fascist death squads in Latin America are actively disappeared.) Not only the rainforests, which contain perhaps half of the world's species of plants and animals, are threatened—an acre of trees is levelled every eight seconds in North America, and biologists believe twenty percent of plants in

northern temperate zones will be gone by the next century. In the oceans, the same massacre is going on, as they are simultaneously poisoned and denuded of their living organisms.

Forest death from acid and toxic rain, diminishing topsoil, nuclear waste, wandering garbage barges, global urbanization—the list goes on and on. Everywhere, uncountable species and ecosystems—including most of those that make the world recognizable to us, and many more that we will never encounter before they vanish forever—are going down capital's drain.

I say capital's drain, for isn't it investment, capital expansion, economic growth, and the drive for profit that are torching the forests and raking the seas? Listen to the words of Lowell Moholt, director of investor relations for Weyerhaeuser, the ten billion dollar logging company that is the biggest private possessor of forests (in Deathspeak, timberland) in the world, presently telling some of the last remnants of North American old-growth forests in the Pacific northwest: "We are rational people... We have to run our company to the best of our ability for our shareholders... You can't ignore that a lot of our products are just commodities..." This is the rationality that is dragging the entire world to its doom, led along by powerful institutions administered by the experts of "practical next steps," practitioners of what C. Wright Mills, in a prescient book written in 1958 about the nuclear war establishment, *The Causes of World War Three*, called "crackpot realism."

"In this society," Mills wrote, "between catastrophic event and everyday interests there is a vast moral gulf... The atrocities of our time are done by men as 'functions' of a social machinery—men possessed by an abstracted view that hides from them the human beings [and we would add, those other beings] who are their victims and, as well, their own humanity. They are inhuman acts because they are impersonal. They are not sadistic but merely businesslike; they are not aggressive but merely efficient; they are not emotional at all but technically clean-cut."

Such "moral insensibility," Mills notes, was dramatized by the Nazis, but it has also been demonstrated in wars like Korea and Vietnam, in the planning agencies for World War Three (yes, and believe it or not, they are also planning World War Four), and in the Corporate headquarters where blueprints for cutting down the Tree of Life are continuously revised, updated, and embellished by well-fed, well-paid functionaries.

Thus it should come as no surprise that every year, more than a ton of hazardous waste is produced for every man, woman and child in the United States. These are the production wastes, mind you, not the toxic products themselves, like the automobiles and electronic and plastic gizmos, the pesticides and chemical compounds that appear in the marketplace. And technicians work every day to find "new disposal methods"—constructing zig-zags of garbage and high-tech incinerators—while publicists get paid to assure toxic victims that all is well with the world and that we are achieving "better living through chemistry."

The economy—that is, the accumulation of capital—is the bottom line. The year that *Time* dubbed the Earth "planet of the year," profits for basic extractive/exploitive industries increased across the board, with metals up 110 percent, petroleum refining up 63 percent, forest products up 45 percent, chemicals up 35 percent, electronics up 19 percent, pharmaceuticals up 17 percent, and motor vehicles up 12 percent. It's no accident that the Earth (and our communities along with it) is being reduced to a cesspool—the entire world is being mined, and the work machine of the Empire is riding the crest of the contamination from which it profits.

## 2. 1970–1990: Whose Earth?

If Earth Day 1970 was one of many manifestations in the 1960s of the desire to become a "friction against the Machine," it also suffered from domesticated qualities that blunted its potential radicality from its inception. In fact, Earth Day had the full support of the establishment and the press. In Washington, D.C., maverick journalist I.F. Stone noted that half of Nixon's cabinet was on the speakers' platform.

"Looking out at that tumultuous sea of sweet faces..." he wrote, "I felt that just as the Caesars once used bread and circuses so ours were at last learning to use rock-and-roll, idealism and non-inflammatory social issues to turn the youth off from more urgent concerns which might really threaten the power structure. And I said so in my speech." Stone underestimated the seriousness of the ecological crisis, but he had a point. "Here was the country slipping into a wider war in Southeast Asia," he observed, "but we were talking as if we had nothing to worry about but our drains."

In fact, that spring brought the invasion and massive bombing of Cambodia in a war which at the time inspired conservation biologists to coin the term ecocide. In some places (for example Flint, Michigan where antiwar radicals waving Viet Cong flags chased Michigan Governor William Milliken away during an Earth Day speech), connections were made; but generally they were missed. At the University of Michigan, for example, students listened politely to representatives of the Dow Chemical Company, which in addition to being a major contaminator of Michigan land and waters, manufactured napalm (jellied gasoline) and chemical defoliants to be used in Vietnam, a war against the entire natural and human ecology. (Describing the massive destruction of Vietnam's forests by Agent Orange and other deadly chemicals to starve out and expose the resistance, one military officer remarked, "The trees were the enemy.")

Capitalists such as Henry Ford II and Lawrence Rockefeller were prominent and widely published Earth Day promoters, with Hank the Deuce promising to install "the cleanest coke ovens in the world" in his auto factories. (Rockefeller's name appears among the Earth Day 1990 (TM) International Board of Sponsors, along with that of Vietnam era war criminal Robert McNamara.)

The ecological imbalances caused by industrial capitalism are now approaching dangerous and unprecedented thresholds; mass starvation is a permanent fixture of the world global economy, while in the industrialized world elites are achieving unparalleled and obscene consumption levels. If the last twenty years have demonstrated anything, it is the failure of environmentalism to halt the process of planet-wide destruction. Yet the Earth Day revival is predicated on the same failed strategy and the same reformism.

Most significant is the liberal assumption or at least the implication that ecological devastation is an aberration, a well-intentioned error (just as Vietnam was seen as a mistake in the 1960s) rather than the direct result of programmatic policies (even if ultimately suicidal) on the part of elites to expand exploitation, extraction and imperial power. Or it is seen as a feedback of the "good life" brought by modern industrialism, which can be corrected by a mix of technofix fine-tuning and personal piety.

Thus the official Earth Day 1990 "Green Pledge" urges its adherent "to adopt a lifestyle as if every day were Earth Day," and "to buy and use those products least harmful to the environment and...to the maximum extent possible do business with corporations that promote global environmental responsibility." Of course, what corporation doesn't promote environmental responsibility? That's what publicity departments are for. Nowhere is the comparatively recent social system of buying and using products of corporate power ever questioned, even though the ecological crisis is one of geological dimensions. Nor is the possibility that the very structures and content of industrialized society are inherently anti-ecological ever mentioned. Instead, Earth Day recruits are reduced to eco-production, eco-work, eco-investing and eco-shopping in a world that functions essentially in the same manner as the present one.

Schizophrenia about commodity production (a more technical term for what has been called the "throwaway society") runs through the Earth Day literature. Even Henry Ford could write, in a *Look* magazine essay in 1970, "Modern industrial society is based on the assumption that it is both possible and desirable to go on forever providing more and more goods for more and more people. Today, that assumption is being seriously challenged. More goods do not necessarily mean more happiness.

More goods may eventually mean more junk, and the junk in the air, in the water and on the land could make earth unfit for human habitation before we reach the 21<sup>st</sup> century." Yet Hank's entire existence was geared to the economic necessity of manufacturing more cars for more people. The capitalist enterprise must either expand its empire, its markets, its exploitation of "resources" (read: nature and humanity reduced to commodities) or it will die. Earth Day 1990 (TM)—as sincere as it may be—takes for granted the working and the buying that keep capital reproducing itself at the expense of the planetary web of life, and recommends that capital expand into the production of "Earth-friendly" commodities. It fails to see what might become the revolutionary insight of a radical ecological perspective that challenges the production system itself. High energy/ commodity consumption is fundamentally destructive—not only to the natural world, but to human personhood, autonomy and community as well. Industrialism promises a "higher" standard of living by undermining the possibilities of a deeper kind of life, one characterized by such values as autonomy, community, direct control by individuals and communities over tools and forms of subsistence, access to clean air and water, silence, green areas and even wilderness. As Ivan Illich observes in *Tools for Conviviality*, "The individual's autonomy is intolerably reduced by a society that defines

the maximum satisfaction of the maximum number as the consumption of material goods...The organization of the entire economy toward the 'better' life has become the major enemy of the good life." Industrialism is a cultural and political dead-end.

Thus, correspondingly, the political illusions of mass technology's republic are also affirmed by the Earth Day pledge, with the signer agreeing "to vote and support those candidates who demonstrate an abiding concern for the environment" (once more, concern!), and "to support the passage of local, state and federal laws and international treaties that protect the environment." This pledge constitutes a massive, societal denial. What candidates are not so enmeshed in the business-as-usual of politics as to have all their alleged "concern" over present conditions completely undermined? And where have laws and regulations ultimately done much more than to provide flimsy assurances of protection in the face of actual capital expansion? A strategy of negotiated regulation with the contaminators and the exploiters can only result in tragedy, farce or both. Industrialism is also an evolutionary dead-end. We are against a wall and cannot wait twenty more years for the lessons of another Earth Day. An entirely new kind of politics, a far more profound response is needed, something Rudolf Bahro, in *Building the Green Movement*, has called "an anti-investment and a deconcentration strategy, an emergency brake against any further 'progress' in the fateful direction which the accumulation of capital, driven by the world market, is taking."

Such a response would have to move rapidly beyond environmentalism, beyond even radical environmentalism (to the degree that the latter has only employed "radical" tactics to further environmental reforms). It would need to create a social movement that clearly recognizes the myriad connections between global capital, nation-state empires, industrial growth, the disabling impact of mass technics on human culture, and the social and ecological chaos which result: a social movement which begins by elaborating a profound critique of the global urban-industrial megamachine and which bases its practices on this outlook. Neither a reform environmentalism that leaves the capitalist economy in place, nor an eco-leftism that leaves industrial civilization intact by placing it under the direction of some spurious form of socialist commonwealth can be enough: we must challenge not only the motor forces of urban-industrial expansion presently fraying the very tissue of life, but their technological and cultural content as well. Ecological conversion demands technological inversion. Human autonomy and a renewal of authentic planetary energies can only be expressed by starting with the prime task at hand: the critical and practical deconstruction of the power grid and its corresponding industrial work pyramid. Any "democratically managed" megamachine would simply allow capital to reorganize without the former owners.

### 3. Toward a Festival of the Oppressed

The two currents that brought about the first Earth Day are in motion once more. On the one hand, there is a growing genuine desire to turn things back, to stop the runaway colossus from sending all of human society and several hundred million years of evolutionary development hurtling into the abyss for which it is surely headed. A radicalization among young people is occurring on many levels, and to an extent not seen during the last decade; young people seem to be linking the large questions of militarism, social oppression, ecological destruction, megatechnics and alienation into a vibrant radical response. They are responding to the idea of Earth Day out of the desperate sense that time is running out, and they are correct. Many of the activists among the organizers of Earth Day are impelled by the same desperation.

But the same powers of manipulation continue to function: the chemical manufacturers will plant some trees, and even the "forest products" magnates will, as they generally do, plant some trees. George Bush has called for the planting of a billion trees—but none of the rulers or their allies mention the possibility of refraining from cutting a billion trees (in particular, say, the last few remnants of old growth forests, but also anywhere where woods are coming under the developers' blades). These forces, these institutions are concealing their grisly daily business with a multimedia extravaganza, a spectacle that converts a natural love of what is alive into a pointless civic ritual.

What would an authentic Earth Day look like? Wouldn't it look like a general strike, a moratorium on production, a reduction of mechanical movement and with it of the industrial noise that drowns out the wind, when all of the former cogs of the megamachine take a long look at the world perhaps for the first time, and begin the process of becoming living subjects once more? Wouldn't they engage one another in a face-to-face discourse for the first

time, taking stock of hands and feet and head and heart as the real material bases for a new society? Wouldn't they simply ignore the television stations, rather than attempting to capture them to broadcast the pronouncements of the latest revolutionary-industrial junta? Wouldn't they begin to retrace their steps, back away from the edge of the precipice, turning things off and beginning to rely on their communities and their own human powers to meet their few trifling needs so as to get on with the real adventure of living, of singing, of dreaming? And that first night—wouldn't the sky be dark and beauteous and studded with stars for the first time in memory? Wouldn't a different language, spangled with eternity, find its way into daily discourse as the conditioning of industrialism and manufactured values began to be shed?

Couldn't it be, rather than one more supervised saturnalia for the inmates, a festival of the oppressed capable of bursting its limits and calling a new culture into being? (And who might be the oppressed?—Surely not only human victims, but all the branches of life's tree. The very stones groan under this civilization's weight.)

Let us be clear to those who propose only negotiated half-measures and "practical politics" for fear that anything more will be too radical, too "utopian." Collaboration with the wide array of the forces of extermination now facing us will bring only extermination, whether it be in a general conflagration or in small graduated doses. Surely a new defiant outlook starting with what is impossible for this world can lead us to those measures necessary to realize our desires.

# fifth Estate

Lewis Cannon

Earth Day?

We Want a Festival of the Oppressed! The Solution to Pollution is Revolution

1990

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/334-summer-1990/earth-day>

Fifth Estate #334, Summer, 1990

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**