

Peering into the Abyss

Primitivo Solis (David Watson)

1991

discussed in this article:

Encyclopaedia of Nuisances: Dictionary of the irrational in the sciences, trades and industrial arts, April 1989, "Abyss."
Author anonymous, no price listed. Available from Boite postale 188, 75665 Paris Cedex 14 France

"It seems somewhat ridiculous to talk of revolution...But everything else is even more ridiculous, since it implies accepting the existing order in one way or another."

—Situationist International, quoted in Ken Knabb's *The Relevance of Rexroth*

Hey! Remember Earth Day? That enviro-corporate saturnalia proclaimed official by enviro-president George Bush, who called on "the American people...as consumers and citizens" to protect the environment? (In that order, too: as consumers first. The slave-like obedience of the latter role only provides the conditions for the Pavlovian bulimia of the former.)

The American People—that manufactured and increasingly repulsive monstrosity of the market—was presumably urged to look for the corporate "green seal of approval" on the avalanche of doodads it buys. This is, of course, unless one happens to be broke and/or homeless, in which case the invitation is to go straight to hell without passing Go. (Don't get me wrong—I used to be an American before I discovered the real name of this continent. Many of my best friends are Americans, with every capacity to become the human beings they were born to be, as soon as they cease to be Americans, which is to say, as soon as they cease to be, among other things, consumers and citizens.)

Earth Day was all over by April 23, after die-hard radicals and various other druidic types who actually take the earth seriously were swept from Wall Street and the Pacific Stock Exchange so the Empire could get on with the business-as-usual of resource extraction. The holiday was great for business; plenty of companies learned to start printing their investment brochures on fancy recycled paper with cute stickum NASA photos of the earth, and lots of consortiums and companies (mining, timber, nukes, even the American Cattlemen's Association—real hormones for real people) fanfared their love of Mother Earth with the nostrum that for them, "Earth Day Is Every Day." One big happy family.

But—surprise—things aren't getting better, they're continuing to rapidly deteriorate. The evidence? As radical ex-green Rudolf Bahro once observed, "I don't intend to prove anything, to present the evidence for those who don't want to read the writing on the wall, as I believe that facts and arguments are not what such people lack."

The evidence can be found every day by opening up newspapers, scientific journals and magazines, by turning on the radio. Then, of course, there is the constant barrage of the functionaries who are paid to demonstrate that the doomsayers are mistaken, that things aren't so bad, that in fact they have probably never been better, that more studies at least are needed before we upset the delicate balance...of capital accumulation.

As the authors of this pamphlet note, "The glut of 'information' that besieges us creates a sort of white noise causing everything to be quickly forgotten...In the case we are considering [the nuclear "accident" at Chernobyl] for example, the only piece of news worth thinking about was naturally bound to disappear from our awareness

along with the vast mass of nonsense in which it was buried. The item in question was the fact that the people who have opened up the abyss so clearly revealed at Chernobyl are actively pushing us towards its brink.”

Indeed, “Abyss” is the title of this essay, part of a series of encyclopedia essays that, while not yet out of the letter A, has already managed to go very far in describing the precarious context in which we all now find ourselves. The issue at hand—Chernobyl as paradigm of a megamachine spinning out of control—has joined a long list of horror stories familiar to FE readers and just about everyone else. But, sadly, the grisly business continues anyway.

One week after Earth Day, a minor information leak brought Chernobyl back into the public (which is to say, the media) eye, as Soviet authorities acknowledged that the consequences of the disaster were turning out to be far worse than previously reported. One in five Byelorussians now live in contaminated regions, and one or two children a week (rather than “normal” levels of one or two a year) are dying of leukemia. A U.S. public health specialist who had just returned from the Soviet Union commented, “Every time they look, the situation is worse than before.”

Well said, but unfortunately it was already the week after Earth Day. According to recent studies, the thyroid glands of 150,000 people were “seriously affected” by doses of radioactive iodine, with thyroid cancer five to ten times the expected rate under “normal” conditions of industrialism. The death rate of workers at the plant is ten times what it was before the explosion and fire.

Capital “Cannot Afford Life”

Despite these and other revelations (for example, concerning widespread leaks and contamination around Department of Energy nuclear weapons facilities in the U.S.), the nuclear colossus pushes on, even posing as the solution to petrochemical civilization’s global warming crisis and its oil addiction—a solution quickly demonstrated to be a patent scientific hoax.

Of course, that didn’t stop it from being perpetrated, for example by a Westinghouse vice president who called the nuclear industry the “heroes” of “the environmental decade.” One is simply urged to pay no attention to the wizards behind the curtain.

As the author of “Abyss” notes, the society reflected and administered by Westinghouse vice presidents and their ilk “*simply cannot afford life*.” The “experts” remind us regularly that the basic conditions of life, be it “the life of trees or the life of human beings, are far beyond the means of our economic system...” And the technological apparatus developed by that system eliminates not only living activity and practical skills but the basis for life itself. Ultimately, not only is what was once seen as the proletarian project extinguished, but the proletarians themselves.

Thus “the production of robots is naturally (or rather, unnaturally) accompanied by the development of an environment suitable only for robots.” Subsequently, “That the demand for life itself has now become a revolutionary programme is demonstrated, at least negatively, by the following fact: carried farther and farther into madness by the necessities of their dominance, those social forces which would have once been described as conservative are no longer concerned even with the conservation of the biological bases of the survival of the species. Quite the opposite, because they are in fact bent on the methodical destruction of those bases...”

Even as I write, the troops are readying for the invasion of Kuwait to take back oil fields and cheap oil labor for the industrialized world necropolis; at the very same time, science bureaucrats of the nation-states where the ideology of progress has been strongest (the U.S. and the Soviet Union) maneuver in Geneva at a world conference on global warming in order to soften the warnings and reduce already inadequate recommendations.

But Chernobyl and all like horrors loom overhead, signaling what is to come. “After a disaster like Chernobyl,” writes our encyclopediste, “the new theodicy of technological progress appears to all in the shape of a dark fatality, a dispenser of insidious, ineluctable evils which can only be conjured away by the incantations of a priestly caste of experts.”

Revolution Reconsidered

Now that nuclearism has become, as the author says, parodying nuke-speak itself, “the ‘maximum acceptable level’ of class power,” where does that leave us? For one thing, many of the old obstacles to revolution are potentially removed. Nationalism, for example, is nullified by the “internationalist” radioactive clouds, so to speak, that ignore all borders. The “last mystification propagated by a submissive intelligentsia,” that of democracy, has also been discredited as it has been increasingly colonized by nuclear despotism. Gone, too, “all the false dilemmas nourished by the (largely ideological) alternative between reform and revolution, for it is now plain that no change, not even the most limited, can be expected to occur as long as all those interests which control the social whole are not brought into question.”

This pamphlet reminds us that the discourse of revolution, eroded as it has become by its close association historically with the expansion of capital itself, must now be reconsidered, though in new ways. As conditions have significantly degraded and we teeter on the edge of some terrible threshold, we find ourselves thrown back onto it out of dire necessity.

For those of us who have been engaged in a radical critique of revolutionary movements as the project of the “left wing of capital,” revolution has been seen as an ambiguous development, even as a kind of social-historical Trojan Horse that cleared the ground for new tyrannies, new improved forms of exploitation and deepening modes of alienation. As Jacques Camatte wrote in *Against Domestication*, “We have got to remember that capital, as it constantly overthrows traditional patterns of life, is itself revolution. This should lead us to think again about the nature of revolution, and to realize that capital is able to take control of social forces in order to overthrow the established order in insurrections directed against the very society which it already dominates.”

Yet revolution cannot be abandoned; we have to find a way to reclaim it, to redefine it, because we no longer have any choice but to bring “the social whole” into question through our activities, not just as a precondition for making the kind of society that we desire, but for defending the minimum conditions for our survival as a species on a livable planet. Such a project begins by our becoming, simply, “partisans of truth,” and then seeking those others, like ourselves, who are beginning to see beyond the safety valves, evacuation drills, and disaster relief campaigns to a completely different way of life. Practical communication and collaboration, rather than theoretical debate, become the key.

“No doubt one could find other ruling classes in history who, having lost all historical perspective beyond their own survival, sank into a suicidal irresponsibility,” writes the author, “but never in the past has a ruling class been able to press such vast means into the service of such a total contempt for life.” It is these vast means that not only stand poised against our efforts, but which work every day to loosen and collapse the ground beneath our feet.

At every hesitation, every lost opportunity to find allies, at every chance missed in challenging the entire system, more of this poisonous sea seeps into our lives.

Yes, Earth Day is every day, friends. Sharpen your knives. We have to make revolution against the Big Machine today.

—Primitivo Solis
September 1990

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1991

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/336-spring-1991/peering-into-the-abyss>
Fifth Estate #336, Spring, 1991

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