

# An Address

**...to Those Who Want to Manage the Nuisances Rather Than Suppress Them**

## Encyclopedie des Nuisances

1992

This slightly abridged Encyclopedie des Nuisances text first appeared as a pamphlet in July 1990. In French, the term “nuisance” denotes a serious affliction, not a mere annoyance. Thus, the authors refer to “the State as the ultimate nuisance,” and challenge the reader to look beyond the mere management of our distress.

At least one thing is clear about our epoch: it will not rot in peace. The results of its reckless actions have accumulated to the point of imperiling the material security which was the sole justification for its coming to power. This has obviously brought about nothing more than the decomposition and regression of what we call life (cultural norms, communication, sensitivity, creation).

As an organization of collective survival, every society appropriates nature in some form. The present crisis, which results from the way we use nature, again raises the question of social organization. This issue remained unresolved even as our society’s material, scientific and technical means developed to the point of fundamentally altering the conditions of life: it now reappears with the urgent need to challenge the irresponsible hierarchies which monopolize these forces.

To counter this challenge, society’s masters have decided to decree an ecological state of emergency. What does their one-sided program of catastrophism seek to accomplish when it presents the blackest picture of hypothetical disasters? What’s the point of their discourses that are even more alarming because they refer to problems over which atomized populations have no direct means of action, except to camouflage the real disaster, which you needn’t be a physician, climatologist or demographer in order to have a viewpoint? Everyone can see how the growth of the modern economy has continually impoverished every area of human life. It destroys the world’s biological foundations, submits all social time and space to the policing functions it requires, and replaces each previously known direct experience with an ersatz of residual authenticity proportional to its price. (Stores for the elite are unnecessary here, the market serves effectively enough.)

Just when the managers of production discover the fragility of their world, which is the outcome of the system’s noxious practices, they use arguments from this discovery to present themselves as saviors, and are sanctioned in this by experts. Their proclaimed ecological state of emergency is simultaneously a war economy that mobilizes production in the service of “common interests” as defined by the State, and a war of the economy against protest movements which might criticize it directly.

Propaganda used by the decision makers of the State and industry presents pursuit of economic development as the only possible perspective for well-being, with certain adjustments required for “survival”: they call for regulated management of “resources” and investments that can economize nature and completely transform it into economic substances, from subterranean water to the atmosphere’s ozone.

The authorities clearly continue to improve their repressive abilities on all fronts. For example, in the aftermath of 1968, at Cigaville in the Dordogne region of France, an urban setting was created to train mobile police forces. “Attacks by anti-nuclear commandos” are simulated on neighboring roads. And at the Belleville nuclear power plant, a make-believe serious accident is used to train people in information manipulation techniques. However, the

personnel assigned to social control primarily devote themselves to preventing the formulation of critiques of nuisances or the economy that engenders them.

They preach discipline to the armies of consumption, as if it were our extravagance that destroyed the ecological balance rather than the absurdity of the imposed market production. They propose a new public-spiritedness in which everyone will be co-responsible for the management of nuisances, in perfect democratic equality, from the polluter at the base who releases CFCs each morning while shaving all the way up to the chemical industry. And the survivalist ideology (“everybody unite to protect the Earth, a river or the baby seals”) fosters a kind of “realism” and a “sense of responsibility” in the general population which encourages them to take responsibility for the experts’ stupidities; in practice, this means taking over the domination by furnishing it with so-called constructive objections and the adjustment of details.

The principal agent in suppressing the latent critique of society in the fight against nuisances is ecologism: an illusion that it’s possible to successfully avoid the results of alienated work without criticizing either work itself or the entire society which is based on work. When the agents of the State become ecologists, ecologists declare themselves unhesitatingly to be statist. The latter have not really changed since their vague “alternatives” of the 1970s. But now they are offered positions, titles and money and they see no reason to refuse them, since they never really broke with the ruling madness.

Ecologists are to the struggle against nuisances what the union bureaucrats were to the workers’ struggle: intermediaries attempting to preserve the contradictions they have the responsibility to regulate, negotiators concerned with bargaining (the revision of norms and the degree of noxiousness replacing the percentages of wage increases), defenders of the quantitative at a time when economic calculation is spreading to new domains (air, water, human embryos...). In brief, they are the new brokers of a subjection to the economy in which prices must now include the cost of an “environment of quality.” Land has already been designated as a sacrifice or a protected zone and it is co-managed by “green” experts—a spatial division that, according to one’s place in the hierarchy, will determine one’s access to nature-as commodity. As for radioactivity, there will be some for everyone.

Calling the ecologists’ approach reformist gives it too much credit because it intentionally and consciously stays within the logic of capitalist domination, a domination which constantly increases the scope of its operations using the same destructive methods. In this cyclical production of evils and their remedies which only worsen things, ecologism will turn out to be the reserve army of a bureaucratizing era, where “rationality” has no connection to the individuals concerned nor to any real knowledge and repeated catastrophes are a sure thing.

## **Ecologism Furthers the Status Quo**

Numerous recent examples demonstrate the speed with which ecologism has joined forces in the management of the nuisances. Besides the multinationals for the “protection of nature” such as the World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace, and the [French] “Friends of the Earth” (financed largely by the French government’s Department of the Environment), various kinds of lukewarm opponents of nuisances exist who limit themselves to a technical critique, suppressing any critique of society. If they escape co-optation by the pollution prevention industry, they are co-opted by the State’s regulatory agencies. Thus an “independent laboratory” (independent of the State but not of local and regional institutions) like the French CRII-RAD, established after Chernobyl to “defend the consumer,” chose counting radioactive particles as its only goal. Such a neo-syndicalist “defense” of the profession of being a consumer (the ultimate profession) boils down to not attacking the dispossession that deprives individuals of decision-making power over how their conditions of existence are produced; as well as guaranteeing that they must continue to endure what others choose, and to depend on arbitrary specialists in order to learn or not to learn about the noxiousness.

The outcome of this intense grooming activity is entirely predictable: 1) a “cleanup” modeled on the “war on poverty” based on commodity abundance (which camouflages the obvious misery, the true impoverishment of life); 2) expensive and thus profitable—palliatives successively applied to past messes, giving variety to the damage (which will certainly continue) with fragmentary repairs and partial purifications. The nuisances certified as such by experts will effectively be dealt with in the exact degree that their treatment constitutes a profitable economic

activity. Others, in general, the most serious problems, will continue their clandestine existence outside of the regulations, like low-level doses of radiation and the genetic manipulation that are clearly preparing the AIDS of tomorrow.

It is most certain that the prolific growth of a new bureaucracy responsible for ecological control, hiding behind its rationalizations, will only increase the irrationality that justifies all the others, from petty corruption to enormous catastrophes: dividing society between specialized managers of survival and ignorant and powerless “consumers” of this survival—the latest form of a class society. Unfortunate are those who need honest specialists and enlightened leaders!

It is neither a kind of extreme purism, nor even less a “politics of the worst scenario,” that invites one to categorically dissociate oneself from all the ecological planners of the economy; it is simply a realistic view about the necessary evolution of the situation. A coherent development of the struggles against nuisances requires the clarification, by as many exemplary denunciations as necessary, of the differences between the ecocrats those who derive power from the ecological crises—and the people who have common interests with all dispossessed individuals and with a movement that could permit them to suppress these nuisances through a “well-thought-out” dismantling of commodity production in its entirety.

Should those who want to suppress the nuisances find themselves on the same ground as those who want to manage them, they should be there as enemies, or else they will find that they must play a minor role in a scenario conceived and carried out by the managers. If they intend to transform the terrain they occupy, they must find the means to affirm, without yielding, the social critique of both nuisances and their administrators—the ones already holding office as well as those aspiring to.

People who denounce irresponsible hierarchies must move toward the establishment of a social control that consciously masters material and technical means. Such a road requires a complete critique of nuisances, and thus a rediscovery of all the earlier grounds for revolt: wage labor, the socially harmful experience of which has such a destructive effect on workers that work can be endured only through the massive use of tranquilizers and other drugs; the colonization of all communication by the spectacle, since each falsification of reality must have its corresponding social expression; technological development, which at the expense of individual or collective autonomy increases subjugation to a more and more exclusive and concentrated authority; commodity production as the production of nuisances; and finally, the State as the absolute nuisance, which controls this production, plans how it is perceived, and programs its tolerance level.

The history of ecologism should demonstrate to even the most naive that one cannot conduct a real struggle by accepting the dominant society’s divisions. Defending the straightforward holistic demands of a social critique of nuisances against a fragmented and specialized critique not only reaffirms that, as an ultimate objective, it is not a matter of changing the experts in power but of abolishing the conditions that make experts and the specialization of power necessary. This strategic imperative is part of a struggle that cannot permit itself to speak the specialists’ language if it wants to make allies by addressing the powerless, people who are not specialists.

Just as workers’ demands are and always have been accused of being in opposition to the broader interests of the entire economy, the waste planners and the Doctors of Garbage Cans never miss an opportunity to denounce those who protest against a local nuisance (garbage, highways, high-speed trains, etc.) as narrow-minded and irresponsible egoists who do not consider the fact that we have to put these things somewhere. Obviously the only appropriate reply to such blackmail about the general interest is to affirm that if we do not want these nuisances anywhere we had better start refusing them, exemplarily, where we are, and consequently prepare to unify all struggles against nuisances by learning how to express the unifying reasons behind each specific protest.

It seems quite unrealistic to expect individuals who represent only themselves and don’t claim any status or specialty to freely decide to come together in order to proclaim and put into practice their judgment of the world in an epoch paralyzed by isolation and the fatalism induced by this isolation. Nevertheless, despite all the mass-produced pseudo-events, one persistent fact invalidates the calculations from above as well as the cynicism from below: all aspirations for a free life and all human needs, starting with the most elementary, converge toward a historical urgency to end the ravages of our economic insanity. Only total disrespect for the ludicrous and ignoble necessities demanded by modern society can draw from the well of this immense revolt.

Those who do not intend to stop at the partial success of their protest in a particular conflict must consider their protest as an occasion for dispossessed individuals to organize themselves into a general anti-statist and anti-economic movement: such a goal can serve as a criterion or reference point to judge and condemn, adopt or reject a particular means of fighting nuisances. Whatever enables individuals to have complete control over their activities, beginning with the various critiques of the production of nuisances, must be supported; whatever serves to reinforce passivity and isolation must be opposed. Nothing that perpetuates the old lies representation disconnected from and not controlled by the base, or abusive spokespersons—can serve individuals' struggle to control the conditions of their existence, namely, to achieve democracy.

Voting reinforces and legitimizes dispossession which is furthered by the illusory search for "effective media coverage," transforming individuals into spectators of a cause they no longer define or control. Such individuals become bit-part players used by diverse and rival lobbies to manipulate the image of the protests.

Those who use the media's din to express their so-called "realism" in order to thwart attempts to directly express (without intermediaries or the sanction of experts) the disgust and anger caused by the calamities of our mode of production should be labeled system savers ("recuperateurs"). Similarly, one must denounce the illusion of victory proffered by lawyers and experts when the State enables local protest groups to use legal proceedings and administrative measures, knowing they will get bogged down. We must remember that this type of conflict is not resolved by legal means but in extralegal power relationships.

If the movements against nuisances are still very weak in France, they remain the only existing area where our very social existence re-enters the discussion. The State's decision makers are conscious of what this reappearance represents for a society in which the official reasons are not even examined. Parallel to the neutralizing caused by the confusion engendered by the media and by the co-optation of the leaders of the environmental movements, the decision makers worry that a particular conflict could be transformed into a focal point providing the protest with a unifying pole as well as a focus for meetings and the exchange of ideas. Thus it was decided to "freeze" all discussion concerning radioactive dumping sites and the development of the Loire River basin in order to exhaust grassroots opposition and to permit the establishment of a network of responsible representatives willing to serve as a "social thermometer" (to take the local temperature), setting the stage for "working together" and making false victories acceptable.

Illusions of economic progress have truly led human history astray. Even if this going astray were to end tomorrow, its consequences will be bequeathed as a poisoned inheritance to the liberated society—not only in the form of waste products, but above all as a material organization of production that needs to be transformed from top to bottom in order to serve liberated activity. We consider that committing ourselves to making such problems disappear is the only perspective for reconnecting with true human adventure, with history as the story of emancipation.

This adventure resumes as soon as individuals find the forms for a practical community in their struggle, once they take the consequences of their initial refusal even further and develop a critique of the conditions imposed on them. Besides causing isolation and confusion, a long period of social reaction makes individuals who are trying to reconstruct grounds for collective efforts fear division and conflict more than anything else.

Activity that develops and communicates the social critique has never been a tranquil project. But since the possibility of tranquil analysis doesn't exist (the universal garbage heap having reached the Himalayan summits), dispossessed individuals do not have the opportunity to choose between tranquility and the turmoil of bitter combat. Instead they must choose between even more dreadful turmoil and battles that are led by others for profit and those that they can extend and lead on their own behalf.

The movement against nuisances will triumph as an anti-economic and anti-statist movement of emancipation, or it will not succeed at all.

## Translators' note

1. The word "nuisance" has a much stronger connotation in French than in English. According to the French dictionary, *le Petit Robert*, a nuisance is something harmful or injurious. Since 1965, the definition has included

aspects of a technical nature (noise, degradation, pollutants) or a social nature (congestion, lack of privacy) that make life unhealthy or painful.

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