

# Six Theses on Empire, Denial & Nuclearism

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## 1.

Nuclearism is inherently totalitarian. The apparent controversy over nuclear power is not really a matter for debate: it mirrors the underlying question of social power. Its history makes this clear.

First developed as a weapon of war under the veil of military secrecy, and then in coordinated efforts with enormous corporate interests, it was never publicly debated before the whole society was heavily committed to it. At its inception, public opposition would have brought charges of treason, and nuclear technology and materials are still considered a matter of strict state security.

Instead of genuine public discussion, concerns about this dangerous technology have been marginalized by the monologue of advertising and enforced patriotism. Over the last two decades, the extravagant claims of technological utopia and unlimited abundance have eroded. The dream of nuclear power has come to look more like a nightmare of terrifying accidents, dazzling cost overruns and the unending problem of nuclear waste. Yet public discussion remains little more than a tactical diversion as far as those who administer the nuclear industry are concerned, a manner of periodically changing the Emperor's clothes to hypnotize the populace. They have no intention of giving up, whatever the costs.

The fact is that nuclear power is necessarily totalitarian. From the beginning, nuclear technocrats experimented on whole populations like the mad doctors of Buchenwald. Countless innocent people were treated as secret experimental subjects, entire towns and cities like Los Angeles were purposefully dosed with fallout, native peoples were driven from their land so it could be obliterated in tests, and soldiers were marched into radioactive sites to test exposure results. And, these experiments, which are only the ones we know about, occurred here in the "democratic" West, not in the Cold War dictatorships of the Eastern Bloc, whose guinea pig tests on their populations were little different.

Nuclearism cannot exist except in a society based on class or caste division—whereby one group commands authority for itself, increasing its wealth and power at the expense of the rest. Nuclearism can only operate under some form of authoritarian rule, using commissions and cops to enforce and regulate its power. Thus, "discussing" the merits or problems of nukes with utility companies and government bureaucrats is like debating the meaning of life with a murderer holding a knife to your throat.

The nuclear power question also exponentially complicates the question of power. Even the dream of a post-nuclear world contains the potential for authoritarianism and centralized control; nuclearism has created technological and social problems that simply may have no adequate solution. Dismantling the technology is confounding enough; the more complex problem of containing already present nuclear and industrial wastes (and the wastes generated today as this is being written, and tomorrow as it is being read) makes the urgent need to halt it ever greater.

## 2.

Nuclear power is fundamentally a matter of psychopathology. To the nuclear power conspirators, talk, when it occurs at all, is a smoke screen. It is in their interest for people to see the question as a matter of technical problems, simple procedural decisions, “cost-benefit” analyses, and “risk-assessment” to be discussed by well-mannered experts and citizens. But life is one thing; sophistry, meaningless jargon and mystification in the service of naked domination are another.

Nuclear power is central to a configuration of questions facing humanity today which can be posed in the words life against death. To “favor” nuclear power means desiring your own techno-bureaucratically administered annihilation. To fear and oppose nuclear power, whether out of scientific (“rational”) or intuitive (“irrational”) reasons, is to some degree to resist inertia, to glimpse life beyond the shroud of business as-usual in a civilization listing toward self-destruction. Nuclearism is therefore more than a technology (a word that renders it deceptively innocuous). It is, rather, the materialization of the death-wish itself.

Nuclearism is a key element in a system that, as its most far-seeing and thoughtful scientific minds now recognize, is undermining complex life on earth. Even the champions of this system can see many of its consequences—the Chernobyl disaster, for example—yet they continue on their mad course. Such suicidal compulsion compels us to consider nuclear power in terms of pathology: a fascination with self-destruction and reckless disregard for life, a diminishing capacity in the integrity and autonomy of individuals, and a psychological pattern of addiction and denial. What else explains the continuing romance in some sectors with a technology capable of bringing about unspeakable disaster, and the general indifference and psychic numbing in others?

Even if more Chernobyl-like disasters were a remote possibility (they are in fact inevitable, given the aging apparatus and the corruption and incompetence of the social forces managing it), the risk of perhaps millions of illnesses and deaths, and the need to permanently evacuate whole regions would seem sufficient reason to abandon nuclearism. We are told “we” must have the energy—but for what? Are people really willing to trade their children’s future to run an industrial empire producing things they not only don’t need but in many cases would be better off without? Could we lead fulfilling lives and use dramatically less energy? Is it necessary to sacrifice the genetic integrity of future generations to keep shopping malls lit at night and televisions on? Why, given the horrors of Chernobyl, is no one except a radical fringe asking: energy for what?

This is mass denial. A mass circulation science magazine intones, “The prospect of nuclear war is fading. But nuclear weapons, radioactive waste, and poorly designed reactors are here to stay.” With more fissionable material and nuclear technology around than ever, more nation states trying to get their hands on it, and an epidemic of plutonium smuggling from the former Soviet Union, why would anyone think nuclear war is less likely? The author of this typical article breezily reports on the calamities of Soviet nuclearism, but concludes, “Marxist technology was the culprit.”

How reassuring! Yet what exactly is “Marxist technology”? Every single nuclear military facility in the United States has been heavily contaminated; was that “Marxist technology”? Will we learn tragically after the fact that some containment structure designs in American reactors suffered the errors of Marxism? Was the Union Carbide gas leak at Bhopal, India, from which people continue to die, Marxist? The space shuttle disaster? Love Canal? Blaming the empire’s enemy ideology is a form of denial.

## 3.

Technolatriy is a virulent form of denial. Technolatriy assures people that back-up systems will work, alloys will not corrode or wear out prematurely, landfills will never leak, and technicians will make the correct decisions, pushing the right buttons in the right sequences, with the buttons functioning as intended, and the computers responding appropriately. All this, of course, is massive, utterly irrational denial. Bizarrely, it coexists with a pervasive, society-wide suspicion that nothing in this society works, that all systems are failing and no expertise is very trustworthy or machinery reliable, that everything has been produced by the lowest bidder, a lowest bidder cutting

corners to cut costs. And yet this vast, complex, and dangerous technology, we are assured by its operatives and paid publicists, will work just fine. In any case, we have no choice, they tell us; we simply cannot do without it.

Of course, only the most venal or desperate community would willingly site a nuclear plant or waste repository nearby. People recognize that no technical system is fail-safe, be it for nuclear production or storage (there being no such thing as “disposal”). In complex industrial systems, accidents are inevitable. Most landfills of any kind are already leaking, and all must eventually leak, since nature allows no container to remain intact forever. Geological and chemical phenomena are more complicated than was once thought, and recent research has increased scientists’ sense of uncertainty. Though there are some 400 nuclear reactors operating in the world, there is not one long-term waste storage program in place.

Yet the nuclear empire continues its march to oblivion. As of late 1993, some 50,000 people had died of illnesses resulting from the April 1986 nuclear explosion and fire at Chernobyl. People involved in the emergency response are dying in droves and the populations of Belarus and Ukraine are suffering epidemics of cancer, other diseases and birth defects. Nevertheless, in need of “energy independence,” Ukraine has decided to keep the remaining reactors running and to lift a moratorium on new plants. In the United States, the mentality is the same. Bureaucrats at Detroit Edison and other associated institutions have undoubtedly seen ample illustrations in the media of Chernobyl’s grim results, yet do not waver in their commitment to the exterminist system they manage. Why?

It was Wilhelm Reich who argued in his studies on the mass psychology of fascism that a large portion of the German people desired fascism even though it was not in their interest. I thought of mass psychology recently while at the Edison offices in downtown Detroit. A small group of us were crowded around a reception desk where one anti-nuclear activist was attempting to deliver a dead fish to a public relations clone at the utility headquarters. The office workers and executives coming in and out of the sterile concrete, glass and steel lobby barely noticed us. Those who did seemed to enjoy a passing smirk as they went to lunch before returning to their desks and the routine of creating more Chernobyls, more genetic monsters, more thyroid cancers, more leukemia.

In the short term (until next payday, at least), the people who blandly walked by are making money (and for most, not much money) unraveling life’s fragile web. In the longer term, however, their families, like ours, will suffer the cancers, immune disorders, birth defects and other illnesses occurring throughout industrial civilization, and face the same dismal, radioactive cloud when the Geiger counters spin out of control and the pointers hit jackpot. Denial maintains their addiction to the industrial bribe (the cars, boats and VCRs they seem unable to do without) and to power and prestige (their position in the necktie hierarchy). Denial and psychic numbing keep a suicidal system on automatic. And it isn’t just at Edison; to one degree or another, the addiction afflicts all of us.

#### 4.

Nuclearism undermines human autonomy. The defense of nuclear power routinely presents itself as a defense of individual rights—the right of power companies to turn a profit, the right of individuals to realize the “good life” through unlimited access to energy and commodities. But industrial capitalism, based as it is on the looting of nature and humanity for capital accumulation and power, can only function where human autonomy itself has been looted. This process began with violent coercion during the rise of industrial capitalism; now hypnotic suggestion appears to suffice.

The industrial system could not survive without the active and passive cooperation of human beings who trust and obey their leaders, have faith in the mystical newspeak of experts, and accept every step of technological progress unleashed upon them by government and corporate bureaucracies as quite naturally an enrichment of their lives. They seem barely capable of critically examining their lives and society. Having abdicated responsibility for themselves, they simply recite the litanies of their leaders and bosses.

At its inception, capitalism proclaimed the primacy of the individual only to bring about, in its maturity, the suppression of the possibility for authentic individuality. Today the inmates only sense what they have lost but cannot name; they have little or no framework to articulate what is missing. Anxiety is pervasive, and so is rage. In an attempt to expand its artifactual, depersonalized world while ameliorating the subsequent collapse of selfhood,

capital mines and degrades the earth to produce a world of consumable objects, programmed entertainments and prefabricated “communities.”

The domesticated creatures who continue to repeat capital’s rationalizations in the wake of dramatic accidents and the continuous reports of failed technology—events that might have broken through their conditioning the way a flood in the laboratory destroyed the conditioning of Pavlov’s dogs, according to one story—are reminiscent of the people who craved fascism. (Many now crave fascism.) They are painful reminders to us that time really is running out. Without social and personal change as dramatic as the events that now demand it, life as it will soon come to be lived may no longer be worth fighting for.

## 5.

No nukes is not enough: industrial capitalism is the enemy. According to the official view, the suits and skirts at Edison are, of course, normal and rational—we are fringe wackos. Just as nuclearism dramatically complicates power relations, it turns reason inside out. Unlike Captain Ahab in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, nuclear power cannot claim either its means or ends to be sane—both are mad. Nevertheless, it poses as the pinnacle of common sense, part of the normal, natural state of affairs. Its warped, crackpot realism serves to legitimate a runaway industrial juggernaut bent on bringing about the compulsive and suicidal “conquest of nature” which is the core spiritual value of capitalism.

The conquest of nature, of course, has its revenge in unintended consequences; nature is not so easily conquered. The everyday operations of industrial civilization are presently undermining the planetary life web by obliterating peoples, places and species, causing an increasingly precarious, global destruction of cultural, biological and agricultural diversity. Operating under the guise of normalcy it pulverizes wilderness, wreaks havoc on delicate ecological harmonies, fills earthly silences with the white noise of industrial civilization, and shreds human communities. Recklessly poisoning the entire ecosphere and degrading natural cycles with deadly contaminants, industrial capitalism barely bothers to justify itself; instead, it poses as the solution to the disasters it has provoked (politicians proclaim the need to “grow the economy,” which means to generalize plunder), all the while continuing to accelerate and grow for the sake of growth itself. Having already eroded memory of the ways people once lived, this civilization is working to liquidate the future by imposing increasingly rigid, brittle and dangerous technical and institutional systems on society and nature that are guaranteed to bring about unpredictable but undoubtedly catastrophic results.

A focus on nukes alone is therefore not enough; resistance against nuclear power is just one point in the critique of the system in its entirety. We have to find ways to resist capitalism’s reduction of the living world to production and commodities; to stop the plunder of seas, soils, forests and the gene pool, to reverse the reduction of culture to mass media noise—to take none of modern civilization’s propaganda for granted. This also means restoring and reinhabiting the land in a manner consonant with the natural world and the possibilities of genuine human community and solidarity.

Those who argue that we can maintain a “user friendly,” nuclear-free urban-industrial civilization defy reason. They don’t realize that nuclearism is only one important linchpin in the growth economy of mass production itself, which (fueled by any power whatsoever), is devouring the world to shit out toxic waste and toaster ovens. The addiction to profit, power and an ever-expanding megalopolis will continue to undermine life, with or without nuclear power.

The Persian Gulf War was one powerful illustration that capitalism’s addiction to energy has relatively little to do with nuclear power. As an anti-war demonstrator’s placard put it, “Oil is capitalism’s crack.” An anti-nuclear movement that fails to confront the industrial capitalist system as a whole—not just nukes but oil, production and markets, militarism, cybernetics, the media, genetic engineering—will confront only one of its hydra heads, leaving the root intact. Such an approach is not only bound to fail, it could strengthen the forces that we must destroy if life is to prevail.

## 6.

Industrialism is an empire—life is the colony. The nuclear power system grew out of war and cannot be separated from the accumulation of nuclear weapons by nation states and the unavoidable drift toward more war. Thus any resistance to nuclearism must confront not only nuclear arms but the military machine. And the demand for nuclear disarmament logically leads to challenging the imperial state itself. Any single, isolated aspect of the problem will eventually point to the totality of interconnections. If faithful to the implications of its critique, the call to abolish nuclear power must finally become a demand to abolish the armies, states and empires which administer it.

The nuclear power system is not only a strategic component of military-industrial empires like the United States, France, Britain, Israel, etc., it fits the structural model of all empires, starting from the earliest slave states of the ancient middle east. Every empire demands a work hierarchy, military machine, sacrifice colonies and the destruction of nature and human communities. All have been and continue to be pyramid schemes that exploit and waste some areas and communities to enhance and enrich elites at home. In the end, they all bring about massive destruction before collapsing under their own weight.

The nuclear power complex, an empire within an empire, is no different. Like other components of the megamachine, it brings to mind historian Gordon V. Childe's remark that the first imperial civilizations of Mesopotamia "probably did directly destroy more wealth than [they] indirectly created." Similarly, if one were to calculate the amount of energy the nuclear industry has produced against that expended in mining, processing, maintaining, and eventually mothballing nuclear materials and reactors, it would obviously represent a net loss in energy—an imperial shell game. The artifactual "wealth" that global urban-industrialism creates is likewise a deficit to real social and natural plenitude.

To capital, a forest is worthless until shattered into lumber, just as people growing their own food and meeting their own needs are an economic loss. To life, on the other hand, the vast, toxic necropolis we are constructing represents an irreplaceable loss, an imponderable violence. If confronting nuclear power during its early days signified an act of treason against the state, today it means no less an act of treason, this time against the entire imperial system—most specifically the religion of growth now bringing about the demise of complex life forms on earth:

The nuclear problem appears insurmountable; in comparison, a challenge to the industrial system as a whole might seem utterly out of reach. But we have no choice except to face this very challenge; otherwise we surrender to a fatal inertia. If nothing else, let this sense of urgency sustain us.

*FE staff note:* This is the third version of an essay that appeared in two editions of the FE anti-nuke special. Our haste in getting early versions out to help organize the anti-Fermi demonstrations caused some unfortunate typing and editing errors—proof that if a relatively simple task like publishing a tabloid newspaper is impossible without errors, nuclear catastrophe is inevitable. We consider this version much improved (though we haven't noticed the newest generation of typos yet), and ask people planning to reprint it to use it exclusively.



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