

# Catastrophism

## Disaster Management & Long-lasting Servitude

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In these excerpts from their book, *Catastrophisme, administration du desastre et soumission durable*, René Riesel and Jaime Semprun warn against State-administered management of the global ecological and social crisis.

Riesel is an activist who destroyed GMO seeds at Monsanto's facility as well as author of *Du progres dans la domestication*. Semprun, a major contributor to the influential French journal *Encyclopedie des Nuisances*, first pointed out many of the sinister aspects of planet-saving when it is carried out under the joint venture of Capital and the State.

For a revolutionary theory to be worthy of its name it must provide an analysis of social reality that is at least plausible and it must be able to identify principal points of attack in an effort to transform society.

The truth criterion for such an analysis is not exactly the same as for scientific theories: being "relevant," conforming to the facts is not good enough; it must also focus the unhappiness and dissatisfaction of a certain period on where to apply the theory. Clearly we have nothing even approaching this today.

Even when attempts at theoretical analysis are not simply absurd or wildly arbitrary, they still are unable to design a practice or objective (even a long-term one), unable to say where one's efforts should be concentrated, not so much to bring down established society since it will fall by itself, but a way for collective activity to oppose it so as to have some chance of stopping the destruction of the planet.

Critical analyses that stress the fundamental industrial nature of current society undoubtedly summarize most of its qualities better than others do, and what they identify is both the most universal and concrete. But don't fetishize this statement: underlying this evaluation is the clear understanding that this industrial society is also capitalist, market-dependant, spectacle-driven, hierarchic, and technical.

It also includes the emphasis from the 1960s that insisted that the recent increase in alienation denoted by the term "spectacle" did not imply abandoning a critique of capitalism, but on the contrary, reformulated this critique in terms that make it possible to do something about alienation.

In any case, the anti-industrial critique, as brief as some of its formulations are, already has the merit of satisfying one of the necessary conditions for a theory to be subversive: namely, according to a connoisseur, of being "completely unacceptable," in that it labels "the very core of the existing world to be bad, thereby arousing the indignant incredulity of everyone who finds it good." [Guy Debord in Preface a la quatrieme edition italienne de 'La Societe du Spectacle ].

A critique that would expose industrial society as a closed world that imprisons us must necessarily remain sketchy in trying to say how to attack this "center" in that it has to insist on the fact that the center of this hideous sphere is, in fact, nowhere because its circumference is everywhere; and we are constantly running into it. (Inverted, this provides another old and very suggestive metaphor).

Unless we continue to postulate the existence of a class, the proletariat, whose central place in production makes it a revolutionary subject, it is not at all clear how, realistically, given the coherence of the restraints imposed by the industrial system, it could be ended other than its self-destruction (undoubtedly well underway, but hypothetically still distant enough).

And, after the damage has become so great, we confront the question of resources—and not only natural resources—that humanity will retain in order to reconstruct the world on another basis. In other words, what condition will people be in, what condition are they in already, drained as they are from inflicting the system on themselves, while toughening themselves so as to endure it?

It is possible to argue that a worsening of the catastrophe will sweep away all the conditioning, and humanity's best energies will be galvanized, but the opposite is also possible, the catastrophe, generating panic, will precipitate a descent into barbarism. One can speculate endlessly about this and formulate dogmatic statements, but they will remain mere opinions, beliefs or "personal convictions" having no foundation or significance.

If no theory can be found to respond to such a question, it is simply because this is not a theoretical question, even if it is the crucial question of the time.

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The final extinction toward which the continuation of industrial society is heading has, in a few short years, become our official future. Whether considered from the perspective of energy shortages, climate disruption, demographics, population shifts, poisoning or sterilization of habitat, artificialization of living beings, from all these at once or from still others, (catastrophism does not lack labels), the reality of the disaster now underway or at least the risks and dangers that make up the downhill race, is not merely acknowledged, the details are incessantly announced by government and media propaganda.

For us, who have often been accused of apocalyptic tendencies for having taken these phenomena seriously, or for "looking backward" because we pointed out the impossibility of differentiating between the results and the promises of mass industrial society, let us straightaway say that we have no intention of adding to the frightful depictions of total ecological crisis offered by such a variety of well-informed experts and varied viewpoints in reports, articles, broadcasts, films and works whose data and numbers are conscientiously exposed by governmental or international agencies and competent NGOs.

When these eloquent warnings get around to the subject of how to respond to such pressing dangers, they generally address "humanity" urging it to "radically change its aspirations and its way of life" before it is too late. In fact, by translating their moralizing pathos into a language somewhat less ethereal, we can see that these injunctions are addressed to leaders of States, to international institutions, or even to a hypothetical "world government" which would determine the details.

This is because mass society (i.e., everyone from top to bottom fully formed by it whatever illusions one may harbor), never raises concerns that it claims to "manage" other than in terms that require that it, itself, must be maintained. So, in the race toward collapse all one can hope to do is slow down as much as possible the dislocations brought by the totality of the despair and insanity that mass society has become; and, despite various claims, by reinforcing coercion and subordinating the individual to the collectivity even more.

This is the real message of all the appeals to an "abstract" humanity, an old disguise of the social idol, even if those who issue them, strengthened by experience in academia, industry or specialization (loftily asserted to be the same thing) are, for the most part, motivated by less elevated ambitions and only dream of becoming an ad hoc institution chairman; while significant numbers of people are ready to harness themselves voluntarily to the low-level tasks of countering pollution or providing security for goods and people.

We harbor no hopes for any sort of "general will" (even if those who call for it consider it good, or that it would have a chance to become good if reprimands are severe enough to correct the reprehensible inclinations) nor for any "collective consciousness of humanity's universal interests" which at this time there is no way of determining, to say nothing of putting into practice at this time.

Therefore, we are addressing those who are already antagonistic to the growing collectivization of mass society and who don't, in principle, exclude joining together to fight against the super-socialization. We find this is prefer-

able to perpetuating the ostentatious rhetoric or the conceptual engineering, and we thereby consider ourselves to be loyal to what is most true in the social critique that we worked out for ourselves already forty years ago.

This critique, with its evident weaknesses—more and more obvious as time passes or, rather, as the movement in which it considered itself grounded has disappeared, had a decisive characteristic of being conceived by individuals without a specialty or in possession of an intellectual authority backed by an ideology or a socially recognized competence (an “expertise,” as one says today); by individuals who, having chosen their camp, did not present themselves as, for example, representatives of a class predestined to bring about its revolution, but rather as individuals seeking ways to control their lives and who expected only that other individuals “without quality” would begin finding ways to regain control over their conditions of existence.

Since we believe that a refashioning of the appalling progression of events into something positive depends only on what individuals will do—or, more important perhaps, what they will refuse to do, we offer no pompous declarations. The oracle-like prophecies which served the old revolutionary critique so well are more out of place than ever.

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