

# Limitations of Leftism

Excerpted from “Stopping the Industrial Hydra: Revolution Against the Megamachine” by  
David Watson (writing as George Bradford)

David Watson

2016

The article from which this excerpt is taken, “Stopping the Industrial Hydra: Revolution Against the Megamachine,” appeared in our Winter 1990 issue. It provides analyses of the Exxon Valdez oil spill of March 1989 from the standpoint of a global criticism of industrial capitalist society.

The Valdez was the source of the worst oil spill to that date in U.S. history, spilling eleven million gallons into Alaska’s Prince William Sound, where it ran aground.

Bradford’s article deals with global economics, disaster as an essential part of the functioning of industrial capitalism, and the necessity of individual and collective revolt against the megamachine. The excerpt details the absolute failure of the authoritarian left to solve, or even understand, the root problems inherent in modern industrialized civilization.

The complete article is available at <http://www.fifthestate.org/archive/333-winter-1990/stopping-the-industrial-hydra/>

Despite numerous insights into commodities and the market economy, the left historically has always embraced the industrial, energy-intensive system originally generated by private capitalism as a progressive force that would lay the basis for a free and abundant society.

According to this schema, humanity has always lacked the technological basis for freedom that industrial capitalism, for all its negative aspects, would create. Once that basis was laid, a revolution would usher in communism (or a “post-scarcity” society) using many of the wonders of technology that were capitalism’s “progressive” legacy. Presently, capitalism has allegedly outlived its progressive role and now functions as a brake on genuine development.

Hence, it is the role of the left to rationalize, modernize, and ultimately humanize the industrial environment through socialization, collectivization and participatory management of mass technics. In fact, in societies where the bourgeois class was incapable of creating the basic structures of capitalism—urban-industrial-energy development, mass production of consumer goods, mass communications, state centralization, etc.—the left, through national revolution and state-managed economies, fulfilled the historic mission of the bourgeoisie.

In the leftist model (shared by Leninist and social democratic marxists, as well as by anarcho-syndicalists and even social ecologists), the real progressive promise of industrialization and mechanization is being thwarted by private capitalism and state socialism. But under the collective management of the workers, the industrial apparatus and the entire society can be administered safely and democratically.

According to this view, present dangers and disasters do not flow from contradictions inherent in mass technics (a view considered to reflect the mistake of “technological determinism”), but rather from capitalist greed or

bourgeois mismanagement—not from the “forces of production” (to use the marxist terminology) but from the separate “relations of production.”

The left, blinded by a focus on what are seen as purely economic relations, challenges only the forms and not the material, cultural and subjective content of modern industrialism. It fails to examine the view—one it shares with bourgeois liberalism—that human freedom is based necessarily on a material plenitude of goods and services. Parroting their prophet, marxists argue that the “appropriation” by the workers of the “instruments of production” represents “the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves.”

Conquest of the “realm of necessity” (read: conquest of nature) will usher in the “realm of freedom.” In this view, the material development of industrial society (the “productive forces”) will make possible the abolition of the division of labor; “the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals” will be replaced “by the domination of individuals over chance and necessity” (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*).

Mastery of nature by means of workers councils and scientific management will put an end to oil spills. [or, so the argument goes]. Thus, if mass technics confront the workers as an alien power, it is because the apparatus is controlled by the capitalist ruling class, not because such technics are themselves uncontrollable.

This ideology, accompanied usually by fantasies of global computer networks and the complete automation of all onerous tasks (machines making machines making machines to strip-mine the coal and drill the oil and manufacture the plastics, etc.), cannot understand either the necessity for strict and vast compartmentalization of tasks and expertise, or the resulting social opacity and stratification and the impossibility of making coherent decisions in such a context.

Unforeseen consequences, be they local or global, social or ecological, are discounted along with the inevitable errors, miscalculations, and disasters. Technological decisions implying massive intervention into nature are treated as mere logic problems or technical puzzles which workers can solve through their computer networks.

Such a view, rooted in the nineteenth century technological and scientific optimism that the workers’ movement shared with the bourgeoisie, does not recognize the matrix of forces that has now come to characterize modern civilization—the convergence of commodity relations, mass communications, urbanization and mass technics, along with the rise of interlocking, rival nuclear-cybernetic states into a global megamachine.

David Watson is the author of *Beyond Bookchin: Preface for a Future Social Ecology* (1996), copies of which he will donate to anyone willing to ship them to Rojava; and *Against the Megamachine* (1997), from which this essay is excerpted.

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Fifth Estate #395, Winter 2016 — 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

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