

Catastrophism, Disaster Management and Sustainable Submission

Rene Riesel and Jaime Semprun

April 2008

Contents

Preliminary Clarifications	5
I	7
II	8
III	9
IV	11
V	12
VI	13
VII	15
VIII	16
IX	17
X	19
XI	21
XII	23
XIII	25
XIV	27
XV	29
XVI	30
XVII	31
XVIII	33
XIX	35
XX	37

XXI	41
XXII	43
XXIII	45
XXIV	47
XXV	51
XXVI	54
XXVII	56
XXVIII	59
XXIX	60
XXX	62

“Even if liberty had entirely perished from the earth, such men would invent it. For them slavery has no satisfactions, no matter how well disguised.”

Étienne de la Boétie

Discourse on Voluntary Servitude

Preliminary Clarifications

The final extinction to which we are being dragged by the perpetuation of industrial society has over the last few years become our officially recognized future. Whether considered from the point of view of energy shortages, climate disruption, demographics, refugees, the pollution or sterilization of the environment, or the artificialization of life, from all of these points of view simultaneously or from a few others too, since there is no shortage of categories of catastrophism, the reality of the ongoing disaster or, at least, of the risks and dangers posed by this process, is no longer only grudgingly admitted; today, it is constantly being reported in detail by government and media propaganda. As for us, who were so often accused of apocalyptic complacency due to the fact that we took these phenomena seriously, or were branded as “passé” for having noted the impossibility of choosing between the reality and the promise of industrial mass society, we hereby announce that from this very moment on we shall desist from adding anything to the hideous scenes of total ecological crisis that are being depicted from so many angles by so many certified experts, in so many reports, articles, television programs, films and books, whose data is diligently compiled by government or international agencies and the relevant NGOs. These eloquent warnings, when they come to the chapter about how to respond to such pressing dangers, generally address their appeals to “humanity” and exhort it to “radically modify its aspirations and its way of life” before it is too late. Note that these injunctions are actually addressed, if one wants to correctly translate their pathetic moralizing into a somewhat less ethereal language, to government leaders, international institutions, or even a hypothetical “world government” that the situation will require. After all, mass society (that is, those who have been integrally formed by it, whatever their illusions in this respect may be) never talks about the problems it claims to “manage” except in terms that make its perpetuation a *sine qua non*. Thus, while the collapse is underway, it can only try to postpone for as long as possible the dislocation of the ensemble of desperation and madness that this society has become; it can conceive of no other way to do this, whatever anyone may say, than by reinforcing all means of coercion and making individuals submit more completely to the collectivity. This is the real meaning of all those appeals to an abstract “humanity”, the old disguise of the social idol, even if those who voice them, taking advantage of their experience in the University, industry or management (which are all the same thing, of course), are motivated for the most part by less lofty ambitions and only dream of someday being able to get a leadership position in an *ad hoc* group; meanwhile, significant parts of the population are prepared to volunteer for the dirty work of decontamination or the protection of goods and people.

We expect nothing from a putative “general will” (which is assumed to be good by those who invoke it, or at least susceptible to becoming good as soon as it is subjected to a severe enough reprimand to correct its illegitimate inclinations), any more than from a “collective consciousness of the universal interests of humanity” which at such a level has no way to form, not to speak of being put into practice. We therefore direct this text at individuals who are already opposed to the increasing collectivism of mass society and who have not ruled out associating with others

in order to fight against this *oversocialization*. In this way we believe that we are being faithful, in our opinion more so than if we were to have ostensibly perpetuated its rhetoric or its conceptual framework, to the most authentic qualities of the *social critique* in the context of which we came of age forty years ago. Thus, regardless of its deficiencies, so abundantly evident in hindsight, or, if you prefer, in view of the disappearance of the movement which it sought to penetrate, the principle quality of that critique is the fact that it was the work of individuals without any specialty or authority backed by an ideology or by a socially recognized career (“specialized knowledge”, as they say now); individuals, therefore, who, having chosen a side, did not express themselves, for example, as representatives of a class that was preordained to carry out its revolution, but as individuals who sought the means of mastery over their lives and only expected others, likewise “without qualities”, to know how to act on their own account to re-appropriate control over the conditions of their existence.

Since we only rely, for the purposes of deflecting this sinister course of affairs in a more felicitous direction, on what individuals will do of their own accord—and perhaps most importantly on what they will refuse to do—we shall make no predictions. Prophecies proclaimed in an oracular tone, which so often inflicted such harm on the old revolutionary critique, are less appropriate today than ever. We have often been criticized for allegedly having a predilection for the morbid, when all we were trying to do was to faithfully describe the changing world, which is a necessary prerequisite for any attempt to transform it. The few quotations that will be encountered in notes are for the purpose of demonstrating the continuity of our reflections, to further develop the ones that are still relevant now or to correct, where necessary, erroneous or imprecise formulations. This one, in any event, can be left as it stands: “We do not reject [...] what exists and is breaking down in an increasingly noxious manner in the name of a future that we claim to represent more faithfully than its official owners. We think, to the contrary, that they represent the future perfectly, the entire future that can be extrapolated on the basis of the present degradation: it is, furthermore, the only future they represent and we can leave it to them in its entirety” (“Preliminary Discourse”, *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, November 1984).

I

In just the last few years, the parallel between the environmental collapse that took place on Easter Island long ago, and the one that is currently unfolding on a planetary scale, has become a perfect summary of our historic situation. It would appear that the exhaustion of that island ecosystem was effectively due to the foolish pursuit of a particular kind of productivism: in that case it involved the construction of those sinister statues known the world over, symbols of a desolation their manufacture augured; just like the monumental esthetic of today's megacities. Popularized by Jared Diamond, we shall soon become acquainted with this image of our planet spinning in infinite space, just as stripped of resources in its disaster as Easter Island was, lost in the middle of the Pacific, even in the propaganda of Électricité de France about the "energy sources of tomorrow", among which, of course, nuclear has its place; which, redeemed by climate disruption, will be so useful for us in order to power, for example, the already indispensable desalination plants; or even to produce via hydrolysis the hydrogen that will so advantageously replace petroleum as the fuel of motorized alienation.

So the mystery of Easter Island is solved; but there is no mystery at all concerning the future of world society, which can be made totally clear thanks to scientific knowledge: that is the real message being disseminated by the propaganda. The currently exhaustive knowledge of the catastrophe that overwhelmed a small group of primitive people utterly lacking any idea of an ecosystem to preserve, serves to guarantee the knowledge that we possess concerning our own ongoing catastrophe. All kinds of well informed experts hardly prone to paranoid hallucinations thus inform us with all the authority at their disposal that "the old millenarian fears" now have, "for the first time, a rational basis" (André Lebeau, *L'Engrenage de la technique. Essai sur une menace planétaire*, 2005).

II

Günther Anders' theory of the "world-laboratory", according to which the "laboratory" became co-extensive with the planet at the time of the first nuclear weapons tests, has been positively recuperated, without any rebellious or critical intention whatsoever: as a bland confirmation of our confinement in the *experimental protocol* of industrial society. There once was history, but now there is only integrated "resource" management. Duly modeled, with all the required parameters, the historical process is reduced to a calculable result; and all this, coincidentally enough, precisely at the moment when the experts possess an unequaled and constantly growing power of calculation. The fate of humanity is therefore scientifically sealed: all that remains is to *optimize the preservation* of its fragile terrestrial biotope. That has been the program of scientific ecology and it is becoming the program of all governments.

III

Musil observed that “the peculiar predilection of scientific thinking for mechanical, statistical and physical explanations that have, as it were, the heart cut out of them”, gave rise, under the pretext of a love of truth, to “a predilection for disillusionment, compulsiveness, ruthlessness, cold intimidation, and dry rebuke”. And Adorno pointed out a little later, concerning “the activities of science, which is on the point of bringing the last remnants of the world, defenseless ruins, under its yoke”, in which intellectual energy has certainly been prodigiously displayed, but only in particular socially controlled directions: “The collective stupidity of the research technicians is not simply an absence or regression of intellectual faculties, but a proliferation of the thinking faculty itself, which consumes thought with its own strength. The masochistic malice of young intellectuals springs from the malignance of their disease”.

In all the discourses of scientific catastrophism what clearly stands out is the same delight they all display when it comes to telling us about the *unavoidable* constraints that will from now on burden our survival. The technicians of the *administration of things* rush to announce with a triumphant air the new misfortune, the one that finally renders otiose all disputes concerning the *government of men*. State catastrophism is an openly avowed endless propaganda campaign in favor of planned survival; that is, for a version that is managed in a more authoritarian manner than the one that currently exists. Ultimately, after so much data is evaluated and so many deadlines are estimated, its experts have only one thing to say: that the immensity of what is at stake (of the “challenges”) and the urgency of the measures that must be adopted nullify the idea that the burden of social coercion could be lightened, so *natural* has it become.

You can always count on the old leftists, the most strident of all when it comes to denigrating the revolutionary aspirations of forty years ago. On the pretext of having renounced their former beliefs, they are still marking time, with the same passion with which they once intoned the slogans of their former groupuscules, disseminating the new slogans of submission: “The era does not incite the invention of another providential utopia to make the world a better place. It only forces us to submit to the imperatives of life so that the planet can remain viable” (Jean-Paul Besset, *Comment ne plus être progressiste ... sans devenir réactionnaire*, 2005). For the imperatives of life certainly deserve the sense of history to justify “the dictatorship of the most knowledgeable, or those who consider themselves to be the most knowledgeable”; and it surely shows a certain realism when one expects the ecological state of emergency to give rise to, rather than a revolution, the establishment of a finally effective bureaucratic collectivism.

In these calls to submit to the “imperatives of life”, freedom is systematically slandered in the image of the remorseless consumer, whose incorrigible individualism, *propelled* by the hedonism of '68, has, as everyone knows, ravaged the planet with complete impunity. To respond to the threat—particularly that of the “climate crisis”, which the promoters of catastrophism like to compare with “the shadow of fascism that spread over Europe during the thirties”—the only choice will be to either submit *penitently* to the new directives of ecological collectivism, or pure

nihilism; anyone who refuses to *take responsibility*, to participate with enthusiasm in this citizen-based management of planetary waste, thus exhibits the *profile* of the potential terrorist.

IV

Since we have been so often accused of defeatism, and above all precisely of catastrophism, it is perhaps surprising that we are now, when the catastrophe is like a movie trailer that is projected again and again on every screen, with regard to the future, declaring our hostility to what could nonetheless seem to be an accession to consciousness, or at least incipient lucidity. But such surprise would be groundless, because it would imply a kind of double entry bookkeeping: with regard to both what we said in the past, and what the experts who have become such alarmists are saying. We are not talking about the same catastrophe,¹ and the total catastrophe they are talking about is nothing but a fragment of the real catastrophe.

¹ “The most profound and most real historical catastrophe, the one that in the last instance determines the significance of all the others, resides in the blind persistence of the immense majority, in the resignation of all will to act on the causes of so much suffering, in the inability to even subject them to lucid examination. This apathy will be shattered, over the course of the next few years, in an increasingly more violent manner, as a result of the collapse of all guaranteed survival. And those who represent and support that survival, cultivating a fragile *status quo* of reassuring illusions, will be swept aside. The emergency will be imposed on everyone and domination will have to speak at least as *loudly and as clearly* as the facts themselves. It will all the more easily adopt the terrorist tone that is all the more natural for it the more it will be justified by effectively terrifying realities. A man suffering from gangrene is in no position to discuss the causes of his illness, or to oppose the authoritarianism of amputation.” (*Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, No. 13, July 1988).

V

In order to prevent any misunderstanding, we must nonetheless make it clear that the critique of catastrophist representations by no means implies that we view them, as is sometimes done, as mere inventions without the least basis, spread by governments in order to assure submission to their orders, or, more perversely, by groups of experts who have an interest in advancing their careers by disproportionately dramatizing their “field of research”. Such a denunciation of catastrophism is not always the affair of people who defend one or another sector of industrial production that is particularly implicated, or even industry as a whole. Thus, we witness the case of curious “revolutionaries” who maintain that the ecological crisis concerning which we are now inundated with information is ultimately nothing but a spectacle, a decoy by which domination is trying to justify its state of emergency, its authoritarian consolidation, etc. We can clearly discern the motive for such an expedient skepticism: the desire to salvage a “pure” social critique, one that only wants to take reality into account insofar as it gives a new lease on life to the old schema of an anti-capitalist revolution condemned to appropriate, of course by “superseding it”, the existing industrial system. As for the “proof”, the syllogism goes as follows: *given that* media information is obviously a form of propaganda for the existing social organization and that said information now concedes a great deal of attention to various terrifying aspects of the “ecological crisis”, *therefore* this crisis is nothing but a fiction invented to disseminate the new slogans of submission. Other deniers, as will be recalled, applied the same logic to the extermination of the European Jews: *given that* the democratic ideology of capitalism obviously was only a false disguise of class domination and that said ideology made ample use during the postwar years of Nazi horrors in its propaganda, *therefore* the extermination camps and gas chambers can only be inventions and staged frame-ups. In that case it was also largely a matter of salvaging the canonical definition of capitalism by refusing to acknowledge its “aberrant” development (that is, a development that was not foreseen by their theory). And even before that, during the Spanish Civil War, there were intransigent extremists who blamed the revolutionaries for confronting fascism without first having abolished the State and wage labor.

VI

Just as we do not have any intention of adding anything to the catastrophist inventories of a “total ecological crisis”, we shall not undertake an assessment of the elements upon which they are based, nor shall we quibble regarding the details of one aspect or another of the ravages they catalog. For the essential points of this infernal *catalog of threats* has finally been authenticated by “the entire scientific community”, as documented by the States and international institutions; they are also promoted by the media, quite pleased at the prospect of exploiting such a fruitful “gold mine”, and consecrated by industrial investment in “sustainable development”. Their conclusions, that is, in everyday language, the *choices* that should be addressed or the nature of the *challenges* that will have to be faced, will from now on be debated without interruption. Since the admitted ambition of these catastrophist experts is to initiate such “debates”, it should not be surprising that they see this as involving something like “consciousness raising”. What is more surprising is that people who are not experts look at it the same way, and that these people sometimes venture to declare themselves enemies of industrial society.

If we do not see it this way at all, but to the contrary, as an augmentation of false consciousness, this is not due to an excessive taste for paradox or some perverse spirit of contradiction. For it is something that we have been forced to admit, despite our convictions, and for some time now.

The irreversible degradation of terrestrial life due to industrial development has been described and denounced for over fifty years. Those who explained the process, its cumulative effects and the predictable points of no return, thought that consciousness-raising would put an end to it by leading to some kind of change. For some, this change would take the form of reforms actively implemented by governments and their experts; for others, it was principally a matter of a transformation of our way of life, the precise nature of which remained generally somewhat vague; finally, there were even those who thought, more radically, that it was the entire existing social organization that had to be overthrown by a revolutionary transformation. Regardless of their differences concerning the means that should be employed, all shared the conviction that knowledge of the magnitude of the disaster and its unavoidable consequences would lead at least to a certain questioning of social conformism, or even to the formation of a radical critical consciousness. In short, they expected that the spread of such knowledge would not be a vain undertaking.

Contrary to the implicit postulate of all “critiques of harmful phenomena” (and not only that offered by the *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*), according to which the deterioration of the conditions of life are a “factor of rebellion”, we are compelled to state that the increasingly more accurate knowledge of this deterioration was easily integrated into submission and above all became a component of *adaptation* to the new forms of survival *in an environment of extremes*. It is true that, in the so-called “emerging” countries, from the very moment they are engulfed by the industrial disaster, there are still mass uprisings of the peasant communities in defense of their way of life against the brutal pauperization that economic development is imposing on them,

but such uprisings can dispense with the kind of knowledge and “ecological consciousness” with which the NGOs seek to enlighten them.

When the official recognition of the ecological crisis (especially in the form of “global warming”) led to alleged “debates”, the latter were strictly delimited by the grossly *progressivist* representations and categories that even the least insipid catastrophist discourses uncritically pronounce. It never occurs to anyone to consider catastrophism for what it really is, to understand it based on what it is saying now about present reality, its causes and the deterioration that it seeks to *anticipate*.

VII

In all the representations disseminated by catastrophism, in the way they are elaborated as well as in the conclusions they inspire, we see above all an astonishing accumulation of denials of reality. The most obvious is the one that refers to the ongoing, and already consummated, disaster, which is *hidden* behind the image of the hypothetical catastrophe, when it is not *calculated* or extrapolated. In order to be able to understand the extent to which the real disaster differs from the worst scenarios announced by catastrophism, we shall attempt to define it in a few words, or at least specify one of its principle features: by utterly ruining all the material foundations, and not just the material ones, on which it is based, industrial society creates such conditions of insecurity and generalized instability, that only an increase of organization, that is, of submission to the social machinery, can still cause this collection of terrorizing uncertainties to pass for a habitable world. This will give you a good enough idea of the role actually played by catastrophism.

“Another world” was, after all, “possible”: our world, concerning which one must ask just what it has in common, in any sense, with the more or less humanized world that preceded it and of which, once the latter became a clean slate, this world declared itself the heir because it vitrified the corpse of the old world.

VIII

To provide examples of precocious lucidity with regard to the process whose culmination we are now witnessing, the same sublime authors are always quoted, whom nobody otherwise ever actually reads; otherwise the claim that the disaster has already been practically consummated would not seem so extraordinary. We shall cite a relatively little known example, which proves in any case that defining modern history as a continuously advancing process of imprisonment within industrial society is no abstraction, *a posteriori* reconstruction or fantasy steeped in a noxious defeatism. Narrating his travels through Spain between 1916 and 1920, Dos Passos recounts the words spoken in a café by a “*syndicalist*” who had recently escaped from prison (it is to be understood that in the Spain of those years a syndicalist was something very different from what goes by that name today; and that Spain’s neutrality during the First World War proved to be favorable for an economic “take-off”): “We are buried under industrialism just like the rest of Europe. Our people, even our own comrades, are rapidly acquiring the bourgeois mentality. We are in danger of losing all our hard-fought gains.... If we had been able to seize the means of production when the system was young and weak, we would have developed it gradually for our benefit: we would have been able to make the machine a slave to man. Every day that passes renders this more difficult” (*Rocinante vuelve al camino*, 1923).

IX

In connection with its implicit postulate which holds that the accurate knowledge of the deterioration of the environment would necessarily be a “factor of rebellion”, the critique of harmful phenomena has tended to concede an exorbitant role to concealment, the lie and the *secret*: according to an old schema, if the masses knew, if the truth was not hidden from them, they would revolt. Modern history, however, has not been unproductive of examples of the contrary, which instead illustrate, in said masses, a rather consistent determination on their part *not* to rebel in spite of what they knew and even—from the extermination camps to Chernobyl—a refusal to understand despite the evidence; or at least to behave, in spite of all the evidence, as if they did not understand. Against the unilateral explanation by way of “secrecy”, we must recall that the “French nuclear power program” was approved and implemented *publicly* (unlike the “final solution”). Does anybody really believe that *transparency*, if it had been extended from the very start to the millirems and picocuries, to the calculation of the “maximum allowable exposures” and debates on the effects of “low doses” of radiation, would have prevented universal support for civilian nuclear energy, for “atoms for peace”? You did not have to have a PhD in nuclear physics to have had more than enough information to get a fair idea of what the development of the nuclear industry was and what it implied. The same goes for genetic engineering. On the other hand, since the principle mechanisms of the “ecological crisis” have been recognized, confirmations of its effects continue to accumulate, and new factors come to light, and “positive feedbacks” are defined; and all of this is explained and broadcast without being concealed from the public, in fact, quite the opposite is true. However, the apathy with regard to these “problems” is even greater today than it was thirty or forty years ago. Could anyone imagine a demonstration the size of the one at Malville (1977) taking place today against the ITER project, which is even more senseless than the Superphoenix? The cyberactivists would rather dress up like extras and perform as the backdrop to the summit meetings of heads of State. The explanation for this absence of any reaction, even as the winds blowing from Chernobyl were leaving their mark, is very simple: in the seventies, France was still feeling the impact of the effects of '68. One must therefore conclude that rebellion, the taste for freedom, is a factor of knowledge, and not the reverse.

It is of course true that concealment and the lie have been utilized a thousand times by industries and States; this is true now and it will be even more true in the future. There are all kinds of operations that must be conducted with the greatest discretion and which are best brought to light only as *faits accomplis*. But since the principle *fait accompli* is the very existence of industrial society, submission and its imperatives can calmly proceed to introduce increasingly more extensive zones of transparency within this society: the citizen perfectly inured to his work as consumer is eager for information in order to establish his balance sheet of “benefits and risks”, while, for their part, each and every polluter engages likewise in an attempt to escape blame by slandering the competition. Thus, there will always be raw material for “revelations” and “scandals”, as well as merchants prepared to process it: alongside the dealers in poisons, the dealers in journalistic *exclusives*, the indignation of the citizenry and sensationalist investigative reports.

Under these circumstances, the essential aspects of the disastrous course we have embarked upon have never been *secret* at all. Everything necessary to understand where “development” is leading us has been at our disposal for decades: its magnificent results spread everywhere, at the speed of an oil slick or the construction of a “new city” next to the highway. The fetishism of quantitative knowledge has made us so stupid and so short sighted that anyone who says that a little esthetic sense—as long as it is not acquired in art school—is all it takes to pass an informed judgment on such matters is considered to be a dilettante. In reality, it was largely artists and writers who were the first to declare their revulsion at the “new world” that was being established. But rather than criticizing them and the sometimes ridiculous narrowness of their points of view—which was precisely what allowed them to concentrate on this aspect of the world—in order to discount them in advance by defining them as “reactionaries” (more recently, certain Young Turks of postmodern radicality—*We shall mutate together in the chaos and ecstasy of barbarism!*—have rehabilitated this polemic in the form of a parody, attacking a hypothetical “man of the *Ancien Régime*”), it would be more correct, and more *dialectical*, to accuse the adepts of social critique of being quacks who were blind to such symptoms, as if the ugliness of everything was nothing but an insignificant detail, and only offended the bourgeois esthete. Even the best representatives of social critique, obeying a kind of progressivist superego, almost always refrained, and did so for a very long time, from any critiques that could have exposed them to the charge of being “old fashioned”. The celebrated Situationist International did not expel the neo-urbanist Constant for his hideous plexiglass models, which are so highly esteemed today, of cities with buildings made of titanium and nylon, roof-top airports and suspended plazas from which one could enjoy “a splendid view of the traffic on the highways below” (*I.S.*, No. 4, June 1960).

Stendhal’s aphorism is still valid, but *reversed*: ugliness is the promise of unhappiness. And the decline of esthetic sensibilities goes hand in hand with that of the capacity for happiness. One must be quite hardened to misfortune, desensitized like a person who has been repeatedly bludgeoned by duties, in order to be able, for example, to contemplate without anguish, in an old photogravure book, photographs of the landscapes of the Mediterranean shoreline before that focal point of civilization was extinguished, back in the days when no one ever spoke about the *environment*. (It is of course true that life then was not “idyllic”, we shall happily concede this fact to imbeciles: it was better than idyllic, it was a life that was alive.) One begins to torture oneself into being convinced that the brutally imposed dynamism of production possesses its own beauty that one must learn to appreciate (now, that is estheticism!), and one rapidly descends to a condition of being absolutely incapable of perceiving what is terrifying about this brutality and this display of power. For there is no need for Geiger Counters or toxicological analyses in order to understand just how deadly the world of the commodity is: before suffering from it as a consumer, everyone must endure it as a worker. The catastrophe hypostatized and projected into the future has already taken place here, in everyone’s everyday existence, in the form of “details ... which are anything but minute details”, in the words of Siegfried Kracauer, who also said: “We must rid ourselves of the delusion that it is major events which most determine a person” (*Die Angestellten. Aus dem neuesten Deutschland*, 1929. English translation published under the title, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, Verso, 1998).

X

Faced with the spectacle offered by our contemporaries it is sometimes hard to avoid the impression that they have ended up *loving* their world. Obviously, this is not the case; they are only trying to adapt to it; they have to “get a grip” and are helped along in this by being prescribed tranquilizers, while they have the vague feeling that their body is falling apart, that their spirit is lost, that the passions they surrender to miscarry. However, since they can no longer love anything but this parasitic existence that is now proclaimed to be *without any alternative*, they cling to the idea that, since the society that subjects them to the tortures of permanent competition also supplies them with the psychotropic drugs that allow them to endure those tortures and even to *enjoy* them (in conformance with the model of the Stakhanovites of hedonist-careerist heroism that the spectacle holds up for emulation), it will also be capable of perfecting the compensations in exchange for which they have resigned themselves to depending on it for everything.

This is why, well trained in the sophisms of resignation and the consolations of impotence, they can remain unperturbed amidst the cascade of sinister predictions in which they are inundated. One might think that the apparent urgency and significantly mandatory nature of their official sanction, as much as their content, would arouse at least some anxiety in even the most confident citizen. And this anxiety would have plenty of reasons to turn into panic when confronted by the inability to imagine any practical solution for the emergency, one that could lead one to have faith in the incongruous hodge-podge of principled petitions, moral injunctions and appeals to renounce certain techno-commercial conveniences (in exchange for other more sustainable ones) which describes practically everything that can be explicitly opposed to the perspective of a “final extinction” or, more correctly, of an *end of the world* that is rationally predicted this time. The fact that this is not the case, that catastrophism is being tranquilly disseminated throughout the social body, is denounced precisely for being a form of denialism by the most extreme catastrophists, those who supplement “scientific” prediction with the hope for social renewal, or even a “change in our way of life”. But they think that this denialism affects only the “threats” whose list they update on a daily basis, when it consists principally in representing as threats, *which is just what they are doing*, what is in fact a present reality: social practices and relations, managerial and organizational systems, harmful phenomena, toxic chemicals, pollution, etc., which have produced and continue to produce in the most tangible way deleterious effects on living beings, the environment and human society. This can be proven without resorting to statistical indices: it is enough to breathe the air of the cities or to watch a group of sports fans.

In the light of the long journey that we have undoubtedly travelled along the roads of the end of the world, it will be conceded that it is impossible to take catastrophism and its *threats* seriously; it is just as impossible as judging the disaster of world society by what the latter says about it. The representation of the catastrophe is the offspring of established power: praise for its technical resources, for its *scientific qualities*, for its exhaustive knowledge of the ecosystem that now allows for the best possible regulation of the latter. But since it was precisely these intellectual and material means that served to build this world that is now threatened with de-

struction, this *giant with feet of clay*, and which are now being employed to make the diagnosis and prescribe the remedies, it does not seem too bold to suggest that both are equally dubious, and that both are condemned to failure.

XI

Any reflection on the state of the world and on the possibilities for intervening to change it, if it begins by recognizing that its point of departure is, *hic et nunc*, an already fully consummated disaster, encounters the need, and the difficulty, of discerning the depths of this disaster where it has produced its principle destruction: in the minds of men. For this task there is no accurate instrument of measurement, no dosimetrical files, and no statistics or indices to which reference can be made. This is probably why so few have ventured to explore this terrain. There is a lot of talk going around about an “anthropological” catastrophe, concerning which it has not been decided whether this catastrophe must be situated in the death throes of the last “traditional” societies or in the fate that awaits the poor people of modern societies, perhaps because there is still some hope that the former can be preserved and the latter integrated. However, it is thought that the last word on this subject has been pronounced when it is denounced as a product of “neoliberal” perversity, seemingly recently invented by the famous “economic globalization”: this makes it possible to avoid acknowledging the fact that, after so many years and so many “anti-imperialist” slogans, this aspect of the disaster has something to do with a logic of universalization that has been underway for a long time and which implies much more than a simple “westernization of the world”.¹ The innumerable *syncretisms*—halfway between local idiocy and the universality of the market—that contribute to such a powerful acceleration of this machinery of standardization (the Indian, Chinese, etc., economic *booms*, which benefitted from regional particularities, that is, from the human material that previous forms of oppression have so effectively prepared) prove that there is no servitude, ancient or modern, that cannot be harmoniously combined—in that special meaning of the word harmony for which post-bureaucratic Russia provides such a magnificent example—with submission to total society; not to speak of the absolutely unprecedented monstrosities that are produced as soon as this modernity clashes with those regions of the world which have yet to experience their *economic booms*: one need only think of the spread of AIDS or the child-soldiers of Africa. Generally speaking, however, no one dares to cast a furtive glance at what is happening there with regard to the possibilities and desires of real men. Speaking plainly, although using the usual terminology: in the “North” as well as the “South”, the middle class, the “marginalized” and the “excluded” think and want the same things as their “elites” and the “owners of the world”.

A hackneyed cliché, used in an attempt to provide a dramatic illustration of the “dead ends of development” and to call for repentance, asserts that in order to guarantee an average American lifestyle for the world population, we would have to have six or seven planets just like Earth. Obviously, the real disaster is, instead, the fact that this “lifestyle”—in reality a parasitic, shameful

¹ “One would have to be a Marxist from the *Collège de France* to be unaware of the fact that the commodity is essentially, in its quality as a social relation, the annihilation of all qualitative particularity and all local uniqueness in favor of the abstract universalization of the market. If one accepts the commodity, one must accept its world-in-becoming, of which each particular commodity is an agent, even before they were manufactured in Taiwan” (Encyclopédie des Nuisances, *Remarques sur la paralysie de décembre 1995*, March 1996).

and degrading life whose stigmata, easily visible in those who bear them, receive their finishing touches with the facelift of cosmetic surgery—seems desirable to and is effectively desired by the immense majority of the world’s population. (This is why the vulgarity of the nouveau riche can be displayed with such complacency, without preserving any trace of bourgeois composure and discretion: they arouse envy—despite everything they still need bodyguards—but not the hatred or the contempt that were the prelude to the revolutions of the past.)

Furthermore, certain advocates of the “curtailment of economic growth”, probably not entirely convinced of the *feasibility* of their recommendations, sometimes refer to the need for a “cultural revolution” and finally call for nothing less than a “decolonization of the imagination”! The vague and soothing nature of such pious wishes, concerning which nothing is said about how they are to be fulfilled, besides evincing an orientation towards state and *neo-state* recruitment that is certainly consubstantial with the anti-growth proclamations, appears to serve the purpose of repressing the intuition of the serious conflict that will inevitably be entailed by an attempt to destroy or even to seriously consider destroying the totalitarian society, that is, the *technological macrosystem* to which human society has been reduced.

Ever since medical science has made available the machinery that ensures a kind of *maintenance service* for semi-corpses, and thus indefinitely prolongs their *last days*, it is often said, with respect to the decision that has to be made regarding these living dead, the decision—which, whether you like it or not, you will have to make some day, whether for financial reasons or perhaps ethical reasons—to interrupt this semblance of survival; it is said, then, with great eloquence that they will have to be *disconnected*. The transposition to total society, where all of humanity finds itself subject to connections and intubations of all kinds, is in this case applied to the lone individual. But it also illustrates why it is nearly impossible for the inhabitants of this closed world to imagine being disconnected from the machinery of artificial life: if some of them, among the most over-equipped, enjoy, if the opportunity arises, as an *experience*, material scarcity, it takes the form of a vacation on an organized *trekking expedition*, with its cell phone and the certainty of the flight home in a jet. And one could truly ask oneself, and justifiably so, what ruinous condition this human species would come to if it were to be definitively deprived of the impulses transmitted by its machinery. So that the improvement of its connective apparatus is for many the most *realistic* solution: “The only escape for our children: to put on a suit implanted with all the biosensors that Moore’s law has been able to supply us with in order to feel, see and touch virtually, to swallow a good dose of euphoric drugs and to go at the end of each week to the country of their dreams with their favorite star, to a beach from before the sixth extinction, with their eyes fixed on their visor screens, without a past and without a future.” This is not an excerpt from some homage to the visionary genius of the Philip K. Dick of *The Days of Perky Pat*; it is the conclusion of a very well documented work (Jacques Blamont, *Introduction au siècle des menaces*, 2004) written by one of the members of the scientific *establishment* who, having come to the end of his professional career and settled into retirement, *sings like a canary*.

XII

The belief in techno-commercial rationality and its benefits has not collapsed under the blows of the revolutionary critique; it has only been obliged to moderate its pretensions with regard to the few “ecological” realities that it has no choice but to admit. Which is to say that most people still support it, along with the kind of happiness it promises; and that they will only accept, by degree or by force, self-discipline, minor constraints, etc., in order to *preserve* this survival concerning which they now know there is not an unlimited supply; this survival that will instead be rationed. The catastrophist representations that are so massively disseminated are certainly not conceived to induce a renunciation of such an enviable way of life, but to induce acceptance of the restrictions and regulations that will allow it, so it is hoped, to last forever.

How can you believe in something like “peak oil”? When what you see is, for the most part, a shocking multitude of motors, machines and vehicles of every type, to speak in terms of necessary rationing, low emission cars, renewable energy thanks to the ethanol industry, etc., is to desert the side of the truth.

What all these catastrophist representations have in common is the persistent ideal of technical rationality, the determinist model of objective knowledge; it consists, then, of conceding more reality to the representation that the instruments of mediation allow to be constructed than to the reality itself (what is “directly lived”); it consists, in fact, of granting the status of knowledge only to that which has passed through the filter of quantification; it consists in believing, now and forever, despite so many denials, in the efficiency promised by such knowledge. The determinist postulate of a future that is calculable by extrapolation is, in its current version of *black futurology*, just as illusory as it was in its rose-colored, euphoric version of the fifties (a version that makes us laugh today when we compare it with what has actually transpired). In the scenarios and models of the catastrophe, those *parameters* are privileged whose development and effects appear to be measurable, in order to save at least the idea of some possible action or adaptation. But in reality, the scientists know nothing, or at least nothing certain, about the processes they insist on modeling; neither about the depletion of petroleum reserves, nor about future demographic trends, or even about the timing and the precise effects of a process of climate change that is nonetheless not very far advanced. (What can be known in the last instance, and there are those who have already done so, is to quantify—in billions of dollars—the contribution of biodiversity to the world economy.) The same is true with respect to pollution and contamination of all kinds: the inventory of their combined and cumulative effects reflects, after a long delay, and only vaguely, the complex and terrible reality of the generalized poisoning, which is actually impossible to apprehend with techno-scientific means.¹

¹ “The first and most important of these necessary conditions for scientific knowledge was to draw a hard and fast line between the artificial environment of observation and experimentation on the one hand, and the confusion of the world on the other.... The procedures and techniques which have been implemented in the artificial environment of experimentation have so profoundly penetrated the world, they are so completely mixed with it to such an extent that it has become impossible to disentangle even the causes from the effects and there is nothing left that one can

If we say that the reality of the disaster is incomprehensible by using the very means that contributed to bringing it about, we do not thereby mean to say, as will be understood, that this reality is any less overwhelming than the way it has been depicted for us by those same means.

know through observation; neither the functioning of a mechanical system that is closed on itself, nor any nature that is not altered by artificialization. Therefore, we can say that science, which in order to be built had to 'sacrifice' the world in theory, has ended up by sacrificing it in practice, and has in the process also destroyed itself, since the position of the pure observer that was that of the scientist has by all considerations become unsustainable" (Encyclopédie des Nuisances, *Remarques sur l'agriculture génétiquement modifiée et la dégradation des espèces*, February 1999).

XIII

The two principle traits of the progressivist mentality, in its heyday, were the faith in the capacity of science and technology to rationally dominate the totality of the conditions of life (natural and social) and the conviction that in order for them to do so, individuals had to submit to a collective discipline capable of ensuring the smooth functioning of the social machine, so that security would be assured for all. We see that these traits, far from having been erased or attenuated, are even more marked in that *shamefaced progressivism* comprised by catastrophism. On the one hand, the latter expresses its firm belief in the possibility of acquiring a precise knowledge of all the “parameters” of the “environmental problems” and therefore in the possibility of controlling them and “solving them”; on the other hand, it accepts as obvious that this can only be achieved by means of coercive measures imposed on individuals.

No one, however, can ignore the fact that, in the image and semblance of the always-lost war waged by the deranged public health establishment against microbes, every step forward in *securitization* has brought in its wake new dangers, previously unknown risks and never before suspected plagues; whether with regard to urbanism, where the “criminogenic” spaces spread along with increasing control, segregation and surveillance; or in industrial livestock farming, the sterilized environment of hospitals and the laboratories of *catering*, where, from Legionnaire’s Disease to SARS, new epidemic illnesses prosper. The list is too long to recount here. But none of this discourages the progressivist. It would seem, to the contrary, that each new failure of *securitization* gives him reassurance in his belief in a general tendency “towards improvement”. As a result it is completely useless to attempt to reason with him, as the naïve souls do who enumerate for him the “ravages of progress”.

The way that certain texts of a critical inspiration have defined modern technology as “totalitarian” has at times seemed unfair. Modern technology could indeed be totalitarian, if one takes the prophecies of propaganda literally, which announce a perfect control, a definitively *securitized* world; in short, the perfected police utopia. (In this sense, for example, the accusation has been leveled against biometric control that, as it develops, it will render “all critique and all dissent” “impossible”; it is, however, the other way around: the resignation of all thought is what allows for and requires the establishment of this control as well as all the other kinds.) In reality, totalitarianism (in a precise historical sense) has never itself attained the police perfection to which it aspired and which its propaganda always presented as being on the verge of realization, after another round of executions (where it came closest to this achievement, in Maoist China, it was only at the price of the chaos with which we are all familiar). It is in precisely this aspect, however, that an essential trait of totalitarianism as *perpetual motion* resides; that of projecting a perfectly chimerical goal: the way it removes its delirious assertions to control from the present, by pretending that only the future will reveal their merits, guarantees that as long as it maintains its most organized apparatus in full force, the Party, its members will be incapable of being influenced by either experience or argument. The militant who has accepted this first assassination attempt against common sense will accept anything: no fiasco, no refutation of the ideology

by reality will ever disturb him. His identification with the movement and with absolute conformism seems to have extirpated his faculty of being affected by his most direct experience. In this sense, in any case, it can be said that modern science and technology are, as organizations, like a totalitarian mass movement; and not only (as Theodore Kaczynski pointed out) because the individuals who participate in them or identify with them obtain a sense of power, but also because once they have accepted this profoundly insane goal which is the total control over the conditions of life, once all common sense has been abdicated in this way, no disaster will be big enough to make these fanatical progressivists see the light. To the contrary, they will perceive such a disaster as one more reason to reinforce the technological system, to enhance *securitization*, to enforce denominations of origin for food products, etc. This is how one can become a catastrophist without ceasing to be a progressivist.

XIV

As a form of false consciousness spontaneously born from the soil of mass society—that is, from the “anxiogenic environment” that has been created everywhere—catastrophism thus expresses first of all the fears and sad hopes of all who expect their salvation from a *securitization* based on the reinforcement of coercive measures. It is also perceived, however, sometimes clearly enough, as an expectation of a completely different kind: the aspiration for a break with the routine, for a catastrophe that would really be a culmination that would clear the air, casting down, as if by magic, the walls of the social prison. The taste for this latent catastrophe could be satisfied by means of the consumption of the numerous products of the entertainment industry that were manufactured for just such a purpose; for the bulk of the spectators, this discharge of anxiety-pleasure will be enough.

Outside the market, however, some propose other fictions, more theoretical or political, that “make them dream” of the downfall of a world. These speculations concerning the redemptive catastrophe have their more sophisticated versions in the ideologues of “curtailing economic growth” who speak of a “pedagogy of catastrophes”. But the most intrepid Marxists also want to believe that the “self-destruction of capitalism” will leave a “vacuum” that will constitute the tabula rasa upon which we might at last feast at the banquet of life. They remain in the orbit of denial, since they do not recognize the unified ruin of the world and its inhabitants except in order to immediately get rid of it by grace of “self-destruction” and to deceive themselves with this fantastic fairy tale: a humanity that emerges intact from its collapse into industrial modernity, more ready than ever to revive its innate love of freedom, without getting at all entangled—maybe because it uses *Wi-Fi*?—in the cables of its *connectedness*.

There are, however, *harder* theories, truly extremist in their idea of salvation through catastrophe, in which not only is the catastrophe given the job of producing the “objective conditions” of emancipation, but also its “subjective conditions”: the kind of *human material* that such scenarios require to personify a revolutionary subject. The whole range of fictions of this kind can be found in the Vaneigem of 1967: “When a water pipe burst in Pavlov’s laboratory, not one of the dogs that survived the flood retained the slightest trace of his long conditioning. Could the tidal wave of great social upheavals have less effect on men than a burst water pipe on dogs?” The only difference, certainly noteworthy, is that the “miracles” that were then attributed to the “battle for freedom” are now expected from a catastrophic collapse, that is, from harsh necessity. The proponents of such theories believe that even more deteriorated conditions of survival will lead, in the most devastated, ravaged and polluted zones, to such an absolute degree of poverty and to such misfortunes that what will then happen, on a universal scale, at first chaotically and sporadically, and later, with the multiplication of those enclaves where the insurrection will become a matter of life and death, is that an “authentic catharsis” will take place, thanks to which humanity will be renewed and will accede to a new consciousness, one that will be simultaneously social, ecological, living and unitary. (This is not a caricature, but a faithful summary of the last chapter of Michel Bounan’s book, *La folle histoire du monde*, 2006.) Others, who proclaim that

they are more interested in the organization and the “experimentation of the masses” already see the decomposition of all social forms as an “opportunity”: just like Lenin, for whom the factory *trained* the army of the proletarians, for these strategists who are betting on the reconstitution of unconditional solidarities of the clan type, the modern “imperial” chaos is training the *gangs*, fundamental cells of their imaginary party, that will combine into “communes” in order to join the insurrection (*The Coming Insurrection*, 2007). These catastrophilic fantasies all agree in their declared gratification with the disappearance of all forms of collective discussion and debate by means of which the old revolutionary movement had tried to organize itself: the one makes fun of the workers councils, the others make fun of the general assemblies.

To get a more precise idea of what we can expect from a collapse of the material conditions for survival, as well as a return of the clan-forms of solidarity, it would seem advisable to take a look at the testing ground of the Middle East, a kind of infernal incubator where each agent takes turns sowing his monstrous seeds on a foundation of runaway ecological and human disaster.

XV

We might easily, after the manner of a certain semi-critical sociology, relate the various modalities of catastrophism with hierarchically distinct social milieus, and point out how each one of them develops its corresponding false consciousness, idealizing as a “solution” the professional or voluntary managerial activity each performs in disaster management. Such myopic perspicacity, however, leaves out the most salient point: the fact that there is almost no one who refuses to endorse the authentic *proscription of freedom* that the diverse catastrophist scenarios unanimously declare, regardless of their differences in other respects. For even where they are not directly interested in regimentation and they speak of emancipation, it is only in order to postulate that this emancipation will be imposed as a necessity, not as something desired in itself and consciously pursued.

Such is the power of industrial enclosure, and the scale of the unified deterioration of thought that it has achieved, that those who still have the courage to fight against being completely swept away by the current and proclaim their willingness to resist, seldom escape, however much they condemn progress or technoscience, the need to justify their denunciations—or even their hope for a saving catastrophe—with the data supplied by the bureaucratic experts and with the determinist representations that such data allow them to uphold. All of this is undertaken to disguise the laws of History—the very same ones that are going to ineluctably lead us from the reign of necessity to that of freedom—as scientific proofs; according to which, for example, Carnot’s theorem will put an end to industrial society, once the exhaustion of fossil fuels requires it—or at least its *managers*—to embark upon a convivial curtailment of economic growth and the enjoyment of life.

Our epoch, which is otherwise so obsessed with the resources we are all so familiar with, and with the hypothesis of their exhaustion, has never bothered to make forecasts about those other resources, which are inexhaustible by their very nature, to which freedom can provide access: beginning with the freedom to think *contrary* to the ruling representations. The trite objection will be raised that no one escapes the prevailing conditions, that we are not any different, etc. And, of course, who can boast that they are doing anything but adapting to the new conditions, “getting by” in the face of such overwhelming material realities, even if one does not become so unconscious as to feel satisfied with it except for this or that detail? Instead, no one is forced to adapt *intellectually*, that is, to accept the fact that they have to “think” using the categories and the terms imposed by managed life.

XVI

At the beginning of his *Reflections on History*, Burckhardt observed that knowledge of the future, if it were possible (which, in his opinion, it was not), would imply “a confusion of all desire and endeavor. For desire and endeavor can only unfold freely when they live and act ‘blindly’, that is, for their own sakes and in obedience to inward impulses”. Our epoch, when it refers to itself, believes it can read the future in its computer models, on whose screens the calculus of probabilities, if not the laws of thermodynamics, traces its *Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*. But it will probably see it, to return to Burckhardt’s intuition, as the effect rather than the cause of the torpor of historical energy, of the loss of the taste for freedom and for autonomous intervention; or at least it will have to consider that where humanity has lost a certain vital courage, where it has lost the impulse of acting directly on its fate without certitudes or guarantees, it is no longer fascinated and shocked by the *projections* of official catastrophism.

XVII

To once again parody a celebrated *incipit*, we may say that the whole life of world industrial society now presents itself as an immense accumulation of catastrophes. The success of the propaganda advocating authoritarian measures (“Tomorrow it will be too late”, etc.) is based on the fact that the catastrophist experts present themselves as simple interpreters of forces that can be predicted. But the technique of infallible prediction is not the only one that was recuperated from the old revolutionary prophecy. This scientific knowledge of the future effectively serves to introduce the old rhetorical device of the crossroads, according to which “humanity” is confronted by a choice that is thus posed on the model of “socialism or barbarism”: the salvation of industrial civilization or collapse into barbarous chaos.¹

The trick in this propaganda consists in simultaneously asserting that the future is the object of a conscious choice, one that humanity can supposedly make collectively, *as one man*, with full knowledge once instructed by the experts, and that this future is ruled by an implacable determinism that reduces this choice to that of life or death; that is, living in accordance with the orders of the organizers of planetary salvation or dying because we have not abided by their warnings. A choice like this is therefore reduced to an imposition, which resolves the old problem of knowing whether men love servitude, since from now on they will be compelled to desire it. As Latouche so poignantly asserts, with a *simplicity* that might not be intentional: “Ultimately, who rebels against the protection of the planet, the preservation of the environment, the conservation of fauna and flora? Who supports climate change or the destruction of the ozone layer?” (*Le pari de la décroissance*, 2006). According to Arendt, the problem of totalitarian domination was “to fabricate something that did not exist, namely, a kind of human species resembling other animal species whose only ‘freedom’ would consist in ‘preserving the species’” (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*). On a devastated Earth, which will be effectively transformed, by means of the technical artificiality of the survival that will still be possible, into something like a “spaceship”, this program will cease to be a chimera of domination so as to become instead a demand on the part of the dominated.

“Enlightened false consciousness”, as it was called by a certain author who came to such a bad end that there is no point mentioning his name, was obliged to submit daily to such a quantity of overwhelming information with regard to the dangers that threaten industrial society and the life of those who are imprisoned within it—all of us—that it accepted with obvious relief the hypothetical scenarios supplied by the experts and disseminated by the media. For, no matter how bleak they may be, they at least allow for the organization, in accordance with a coherent plan, of a disaster which it would otherwise refuse to understand. We have long known that, in the coun-

¹ “Ecologism recuperates all of this and adds its technobureaucratic ambition to supply the measure of everything, to *reestablish order* in its way, transforming itself, as a science of the generalized economy, into a new mode of thought of domination. ‘Us or chaos’, the ecolocrats and recycled experts say, those promoters of a totalitarian control they seek to exercise, in order to overtake the catastrophe in progress. It will therefore be them and chaos” (*Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, No. 15, April 1992).

tries that are called, by default, democratic, since they are not totalitarian, the information that is so excessively abundant, and now the “society of knowledge” of the internet, due to the need created by explanation, is an essential aspect of propaganda. Therefore, in the current mobilization to “save the planet”, the catastrophist representations transmit, together with their explanatory schemas, positive slogans: they dictate the new rules of behavior and disseminate *correct thinking*. For the fears proclaimed by the experts (“If we do not radically change our lifestyle”, etc.) are in reality nothing but *orders*.

This has allowed the manufacture of consensus to concede the title of “ecological consciousness raising” resulting from its own operations, to the docile readiness to repeat its slogans and submit to its requirements and prescriptions. It celebrates the birth of the reeducated consumer, the eco-citizen, etc. And just as in the epoch when it had to inculcate the rules of behavior required by abundant consumption, nowadays, when it is necessary to get people to adopt the rules of rationed and *rationalized* survival, children are the first targets of the propaganda, those who must *scold* their parents like the television commercials have taught them (“Without your help, the antibiotics will no longer work”). One hesitates, of course, to continue to speak of children when speaking of these beings who are so precociously well versed in all technological operations and disciplines, and who are now so uniformly informed regarding biodiversity and its degradation, the rate of increase of CO₂ in the atmosphere, etc. They zealously memorize the testimony of the campaigns to inculcate a sense of responsibility (“The whole is what counts”) and vigilantly prosecute the correction of their progenitors. Aware of the fact that the latter, and adults in general, will have to render accounts concerning what they have done to “preserve the planet that they will receive as their inheritance”, they do not refrain from demanding that starting this very moment they must respect the slogans. Trained in this fashion as a militant citizenry, they will denounce to the green police the non-compliant whom they detect among their friends and family. And this is hardly an extrapolation in view of a very official pamphlet that, several years ago, instructed the youth with recommendations like these: “I separate my garbage, I report on any water leaks.... I take note of any restrictions issued by the town council in case of drought and transmit them to my parents.... I will not let my parents smoke in dry brushland....”

XVIII

However closely they may be interwoven, we shall distinguish, for the purposes of a quick summary, the principle catastrophist representations of the future that are spread by propaganda and we shall see how they lead us not only “to swallow the poison of servitude without finding it bitter”, but also to find it delicious and redemptive.

We shall rapidly pass over the apocalyptic school, which speculates on a possible annihilation of the human species whose model remains the nuclear holocaust. A *salaried philosopher* could of course have an interest in perpetuating a tedious commentary—a pathetic *rehash* of the most obsolete Anders—on the need to “think in the shadow of the future catastrophe” (Jean-Pierre Dupuy), but it is primarily due to its nature as a diffuse representation of a horrifying end, nourished by diverse fictions produced by the culture industry, that this *apocalypticism* influences the most common form of resignation with the *carpe diem* of the reprieved death sentence, thus reinforcing acceptance with the feeling of an unexpected new lease on life.

The school of global warming is obviously the one that counts the largest number of supporters, since it is the one that benefits from the most constant media support. What is effectively tranquilizing about this “inconvenient truth” is the fact that it attributes the multiple dangers and hazards to which we are now exposed to a single factor (the emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases). Although the exact course of the warming is still quite uncertain both with regard to its tempo and its effects—while we are all nonetheless educated enough to be capable of speaking about permafrost, albedo and even clathrates and the “oceanic conveyor belt”—the scenario of climate change allows for the promotion of a whole range of “solutions” that simultaneously rely on the State, industry and the individual discipline of the conscious and responsible consumer: fiscal, industrial-ecological (including nuclear), planetary geo-engineering, imposed but also voluntary rationing measures, and even those modern *indulgences* purchased by those who fly in passenger jets who pay for “emissions credits”.

The school of resource depletion, which is often associated with the warming school because of its appeal to rationing and its advocacy of alternative energy, speculates above all on the depletion of reserves of fossil fuels, but also on the depletion of reserves of water, arable land, biodiversity, etc. This *multiple* catastrophe is debated and subjected to the most precise measurements every day because knowledge is accumulating as fast as its object is disappearing. Here, too, in order to impose “a change of course”, a “more austere society”, etc., resort is had to the State, industry, good citizenship, etc.

The school of pollution is represented by a wide array of experts and counter-experts who form the great battalion of the “watchdogs”. Strictly specialized by virtue of their positions, they record in detail, according to scientific criteria, the already observable or foreseeable effects of the innumerable forms of pollution (agro-industrial *processes*, hormone disruptors, genetic damage, nanotechnologies, electromagnetic waves), without forgetting the “classics” (chemical and nuclear), and are usually careful not to trespass beyond the limits of their specialties, except to denounce a “public health threat”. Such precaution with regard to critique has not been enough,

however, to prevent the spread of a feeling, based on experience but fully *documented* thanks to them, of the practically definitive contamination of the environment. And although the protean reality of a pathogenic environment is inconsistent with the hopes for salvation from technology and with the fervent appeals of the citizen's movement for managerial vigilance, it is nonetheless very advantageous for the multiplication of hygienic and sanitary obsessions, in the service of which everyone has to work constantly in order to preserve a health that is almost entirely beyond our reach. This false, privatized "narcissistic" consciousness of very real dangers now supports a vast sector of commodity production (from "organic" foods to nutraceuticals). It is only by understanding the fact that this obsessive form of taking responsibility allows one to remain blind to the disaster is it possible to explain, for example, the fact that the city council of Naples, the capital of a region of Italy that is world-renowned for its varied toxic waste dumps managed by the Camorra, could decree in November 2007 the prohibition of smoking in its public parks without provoking universal ridicule (this measure, to the contrary, seemed so wise that the city of Verona in turn adopted a similar one on the following day).

Finally, the school of chaos emphasizes social and "geopolitical" dislocation. Unlike the most common catastrophist representations, this school does not conceal the fact that the "great ecological crises" will not take place in a climate of universal peace and the relaxation of international tensions. It is not satisfied, unlike the "geostrategic" reflections of certain media journalists and *analysts*, with compiling the inventory of the zones of breakdown of the stillborn "new world order", and is at the same time aware of the dispersal of the means of destruction, the end of the State monopoly on violence and the various forms of emerging "brutalization". It has even provided evidence of a process of dehumanization that is not without its connections to the universal spread of the new technological environment. Completely incapable of proposing anything that would even resemble a solution, since it does not call for "correct worldwide governance", it obviously does not generate much of an echo.

XIX

It might seem excessive, or even absurd, to assimilate the dominant catastrophist representations to a propaganda campaign. Just consider, however, the discrete way the nuclear industry and its notable contribution to the quality of our environment have been blurred together—in preindustrial epochs we would have said, “dovetailed”¹—in the catalogue of threats elaborated by the catastrophist experts. The so-called civilian nuclear industry, concerning which we know how easily it can cease to be civilian in order to return to its original military vocation, is sometimes mentioned by the heralds of the school of chaos with reference to the risks of “dissemination” and “proliferation” it poses in the matter of armaments; less frequently, it is mentioned by other observers due to the proven release of contaminants after various “incidents”. Most often, however, it acquires a much more honorable place in the arsenal of technological *remediations*, thanks to which it is alleged that we will overcome the looming difficulties in order to reach the Promised Land of a sustainable economy. Some wax enthusiastic over fusion, a true panacea that will usher us into that “hydrogen economy” that the illuminati of revolution via industrial progress have even come to see as the sole prerequisite still lacking for the realization of communism. Others, more prudently, point out that it will take at least a century, in the best case scenario, to master this marvelous energy source; and that, in the meantime, the only solution for reducing greenhouse gases is to immediately start building new nuclear power plants, with the so-called “Third Generation Reactors”, which might be a little less safe than their successors, of the “Fourth Generation”, but which are already available. These propagandists who characterize actually existing nuclear energy as *clean energy*, or almost clean, are among the most active boosters of the scenario of climate crisis. And for this job they do not need to be officially accredited by the Atomic Energy Commission or discretely in the pay of the nuclear industry: it is enough for them to have a realistic view of the period of “energy transition” through which industrial society must pass. Besides the ecologist-cyberneticist Lovelock, there are many catastrophist experts who emphasize the particularly irresponsible character of continuing the debates over the virtues and inconveniences of nuclear energy, when China is building one coal fired power plant each week and is planning to add several tens of millions of cars to its roads each year. Other experts, more numerous yet, are content not to broach this controversial topic of the indispensable resort to nuclear energy, which might somehow mar for them the panorama of a future sustainable society. As for the rest, none of them bother to point out the derisory contribution of nuclear energy to total energy production, whether with regard to today’s situation—France included—or in the event of an eventual intensive resurgence of nuclear energy. The same kind of silence is applied to the question of the availability over the next century and a half of coal reserves and the conditions that might facilitate overcoming the objections (cost, “capture” of

¹ An untranslatable play on words involving *estomper* (“to blur, to tone down”) and the double meaning of the verb *gazer* (“to veil, to dissimulate, to wrap in bandages”, but also “to poison with gas, to gas”). (Note from the Spanish translation.)

CO₂) against the utilization of so-called *coal to liquid* technologies and that would allow for the production of fuel by the liquifaction of coal.

XX

After having dared to point out that “the accurate diagnoses of Lester Brown, Nicolas Hulot, Jean-Marie Pelt, Hubert Reeves and many others, which inevitably conclude with an appeal to ‘humanity’, are nothing but watered down sentimentalities”, the journalist Hervé Kempf recently invited us to “understand that the ecological crisis and the social crisis are only two faces of the same disaster” (*How the Rich Are Destroying the Earth*, 2007). In a way, what he is proposing is therefore the elaboration of a social critique of harmful phenomena. We shall pass over the hardly novel nature of this theoretico-journalistic scoop. However old this news is, his intention is laudable and meritorious, coming from someone who is such a beginner on this terrain. One is therefore curious to discover just what this “environmental specialist” of the newspaper *Le Monde* means when, during the course of his “radical political analysis of the current relations of domination” he feels compelled to address “ecological anxiety” without delay: “Within the next ten years we will have changed course.” Because despite everything Kempf is an “optimist”: “solutions are appearing”, “from Seattle and the protest against the World Trade Organization”; “the social movement has awakened” and the oligarchy *could* be divided (and one sector of it “might be clearly shifting towards support for civil liberties and the common good”); “journalism *could* awaken”; and the “prostrate” left *could* be renewed by “uniting the causes of inequality and ecology”. As we shall see, there is no chance that social critique and the analysis of the relations of domination will lead to nothing more radical than the denunciation of the villainies of the predatory oligarchy and the greed of the “mega-rich”.

Although none of this is any more convincing or enlightening than an anthology of *the best of Le Monde Diplomatique* of the last twenty years, Kempf is interesting, and even instructive, for what he does not say. Since his critical enterprise omits, *in an exemplary fashion*, any analysis or even any mention of the most important and certainly the most visible aspect of the “current relations of domination”, the one that a 20th century devastated by the “transitional totalitarisms”, in Mumford’s formulation, has bequeathed to our century: the bureaucracy. In this way, as always happens in the inoffensive substitutes for critique that seek to question economic development without ever taking the State’s responsibility into account, the best contributions of a century of social critique are, innocently and quite conveniently, condemned to oblivion.

Without going all the way back to the anarchist polemic against Marxist statism, it is in the organized workers movement, that is, in the political and social framework of the workers struggles, where the formation of a modern bureaucracy was first observed and analyzed, one that was different from the old bureaucracy of State officials. Michels and, before him, Machajski (*Le Socialisme des intellectuels*) quickly identified some features of what would soon, in Russia, become a new class by way of the totalitarian seizure of power. In parallel with this development, in the countries where the relations of production were still dominated by private capitalists, the rationalized organization of mass production and consumption (the need to coordinate the labor that an increasingly more comprehensive division of labor was smashing into tiny pieces) was gradually giving birth to a bureaucracy of *managers*; at the same time, the Great Depression compelled

the United States to regiment private capitalism, establish regulatory economic mechanisms, undertake vast public works projects to absorb unemployment, etc., the inception of a system of planning which became known as the *New Deal*. This tendency towards the bureaucratization of the world, within which the renovation of totalitarian methods of rule by fascism and Hitlerism seemed to be foreshadowed, was theorized by Rizzi, and later by Burnham, in an apparently objective form but in actuality in the form of apologetics (in the name of the “sense of history”), which, applied to such repugnant realities, was original enough at the time. After the Second World War and the defeat of the fascist form of totalitarianism, a defeat brought on by extremely irrational strategic choices (the Stalinist form, although more irrational in terms of economic management, owed its membership on the winning team to the fact that it had managed to survive for several decades), the development of a *managerial* bureaucracy was continued, together with that of a “scientific research” establishment that had undergone an equal degree of bureaucratization during the war and was afterwards put directly at the service of industry: the organization and division of labor in the factory itself were extended everywhere with commodity abundance. But it was primarily in the State bureaucracies (first in nation-states, and then, perhaps even more so, in the supranational organizations) where the influence of the planners, managers and other technocrats, who are considered to be, and who view themselves as, the embodiment of the superior rationality of capitalism understood as a “system”, flourished. The cybernetic ideology—from which, we should recall, the notion of an ecosystem is derived—corresponds to this ascendant phase of the bureaucracy of experts and expresses their anti-historical illusions, just like structuralism, which is its offshoot in the “human sciences”.

During the late sixties, and above all during the seventies, in response to the critique that so many people, and particularly the youth, directed against the production and consumption of commodities, a program of bureaucratic-ecological stabilization of the economy began to take shape among the planners, who were forced to admit that we were now immersed in an “out of control race” to catastrophe. During that epoch a Marxist could have correctly expressed ironic disdain for this new manifestation of false consciousness on the part of a handful of experts who, after having deceived themselves regarding the real scope of their activity when they were planning an infinitely organized growth, were now content to reverse that ideological representation by now expressing their belief that they could impose a program of “zero growth” on capitalism that is incompatible with its very essence; our Marxist could have also pointed out, and with no less accuracy, that “the ecologists refrain from specifying exactly what social and political forces they think they can rely on in order to carry out such a revolution in the machinery of the capitalist State” (Pierre Souyri, *La dynamique du capitalisme au XX^e siècle*, 1983). This same author would go on to add some extremely sensible observations, which bring us to the heart of our argument: “The alarmist campaigns regarding the planet’s resources and the pollution of nature by industry do not actually portend any intention on the part of capitalist circles of putting an end to growth. Rather the contrary. Capitalism is now up to its neck in a phase in which it will be forced to mobilize a whole range of new technologies of energy production, mineral extraction, recycling of wastes, etc., and to transform a part of the natural elements essential for life into commodities. All of this heralds a period of intensified technological research and innovation that will require enormous investments. Scientific data and ecological consciousness are used and manipulated in order to construct the terrorist myths whose purpose is to cause the efforts and sacrifices that will be indispensable for the new cycle of capitalist accumulation that it is proclaiming to be accepted as absolute imperatives.” (*Ibid.*). The perspective thus outlined—in a

posthumously published work that was written before 1979, when the author died—had the merit of conceiving the possibility that, without going beyond the limits of the capitalist mode of production, the contradiction between the latter’s objective dynamic and an authoritarian regulation of the economy in the name of ecological rationality could be overcome.

In consideration of the fact that a permanent regime of “crisis management” has now been established, one might ask if it is the bureaucracy of experts that has risen to power or whether it is power that, amidst the collapse of industrial society, descended to within the reach of the experts. This would most likely be a mistaken way to understand the issue. For who assumes the responsibility for disaster management, or is prepared to do so? They have never ceased to ply the waters of power, and to cross them. It would be tiresome to provide a detailed description of these *networks*, since it is not our purpose to write a sociology of organizations. In the final accounting, no one who is even slightly aware of what planet he lives on will be surprised by the connivances, the cooptations and the exchanges of favors that ensure the recruitment of new staff members for the teams and bureaus. It was here, among the designers and agents of the development programs that were implemented in the post-war era, where a minority of dissident insiders—some would even declare themselves “opponents of growth”—would begin to “raise the alarm” without losing their foothold, or their influence with their friends, within the institutions, the seminars, and *think tanks*, which pragmatically incorporate the advocates of an ecological critique purged of any connection to social critique. A “win-win” scenario: the so-called dissidents provide the technoscientific arguments that the institutional mainstream elements are eager to hear so they can speak the same language; the latter, joined by the mainstream environmentalists who are even more eager to find someone who will listen to them in the big international organizations, embody that representation of “civil society” that is so indispensable for all institutional *lobbying* strategies.

In any case, contrary to the views of the devotees of a melodramatic and conspiratorial fiction-critique, this changing of the guard in “the coopted cast that manages domination” is carried out in the full light of day and orchestrated with a great deal of fanfare, “displayed on the stage of the spectacle”; and the least that can be said about it is that it is not perceived like the bolt of lightning, “which is only seen when it strikes”. It will soon be forty years since it was first announced, through the mouths of wise oracles, that time is running out, that we have no more than ten years to change course, and to confront this radically new, “magnificent but terrible” challenge, etc.¹ (In 1992, 1,600 scientists, among whom were 102 Nobel Prize winners, issued a “warning to humanity” in which they claimed that “we only have one or two decades before we lose any chance to escape the threats that menace us and the perspectives for the future of humanity will be drastically curtailed”.) One could laugh at a state of emergency that was declared with such a distant deadline, but the explanation for it is quite simple. All that is required is that, once a certain threshold has been crossed in the violations of natural equilibriums, the so-called “negative externalities”, the capitalist *management* should learn to recognize their *positive* potential and should come to see them, in the form of the only “consciousness raising” that can

¹ “Ecologism, otherwise, has not been remiss in becoming political; such a good predisposition could not go unused. From 1972 forward, a multitude of summits and reasonably specialized and alarmist reports were coming to the rescue [...]. This is how, after 1987, the international community began to speak of a commitment to *sustainable development*, a clumsy chimera whose universal success in itself summarizes the progress attained by the imprisonment in the industrial mentality” (René Riesel, *Los progresos de la domesticación*, 2003).

be activated by the catastrophist experts, as a perpetually profitable gold mine which in order for it to exploit, it only needed to convince customers and shareholders.

XXI

In response to those beautiful souls who were offended when an American *manager* hastened to define the tsunami of December 2004 as a “marvelous opportunity” (“which has been very profitable for us”), it is relevant to point out that by saying this he was only expressing, although in a rather inopportune manner, a reality of capitalism (see Naomi Klein, “The Rise of Disaster Capitalism”, *The Nation*, May 2, 2005). It does, however, demonstrate a certain ingenuousness to trace the beginnings of this “disaster capitalism”—a formula which is itself a variety of pleonasm—to the devastation of Central America by Hurricane Mitch (October 1998) and to give first place under this rubric to the foreign operations of the U.S. government and the World Bank, planned to simultaneously prepare the next military interventions and the reconstruction of countries slated for destruction. (In this connection, however, we have seen how New Orleans, devastated by a hurricane, was delivered over to the same firms as Iraq and Afghanistan, so as to be rebuilt prettier and cleaner, more quaint and less black.) The unleashing of innumerable calamities, with their unforeseen combinations and brutal escalations, is universally inaugurating a fabulous opportunity for construction projects for the planetary *trusts* of capitalism.

Regarding global warming it is occasionally said, in order to provide the indispensable note of optimism, that grapes will soon be cultivated in Great Britain, wheat will be grown in Siberia, or that with the melting of the Arctic ice new sea routes will open up and make it possible to search for the oil that surely lies beneath the Polar ocean. But these corroborative reports only very partially explain what kind of *Northwest Passage* is being opened up by the debacle of nature for the benefit of economic rationality, especially when it will be necessary to manufacture everything from scratch, an entire artificial life, with its increasingly more expensive, that is, profitable, technological surrogates and palliatives. On the model of the “Terraforming” projects conceived for creating more or less survivable conditions on those planets accessible to space travel, so-called “geo-engineering” techniques have been proposed, since it is the Earth itself which has now become a hostile and uninhabitable planet and thus the location for the first experiments in territorial management on the scale of the solar system. NASA and the major American research labs have thus discovered the opportunity to promote an “environmental version” of the anti-ballistic missile defense program known as “Star Wars”. (Edward Teller, the same man who engineered the downfall of Oppenheimer and directed the development of the Hydrogen Bomb, and later inspired the “Strategic Defense Initiative”, was one of the first people—in 1997—to publically advocate geo-engineering.)

These grandiose projects, which the most reasonable climatologists reject due to the “unpredictable effects” they could set in motion, call to mind the ravings of a mad scientist. There are also other more prosaic, although no less representative examples of the “marvelous opportunities” offered by an Earth that has now become unlivable. Industrial ecology now has plans for sustainable cities or eco-cities “with zero emissions”, waste recycling, solar energy and all the electronic conveniences. These new colonial cities will be built—in an architectural style that will of course be respectful of local traditions—first of all in China or Abu Dhabi, model cities for the

technological imperialism that has earned a *certificate of environmental quality*. But the research departments of the engineering firms have set to work everywhere in expectation of the new rules that ecological governance will dictate. In his euphoria after “*la Grenelle de l’environnement*” (“The Grenelle Environment Round Table”) which sought to establish market quotas, a certain businessman naturally adopted the martial airs of the Kolkhoz director proclaiming the goals of the Five Year Plan and the slogans of the Great Leap Forward of the sustainable economy: “national mobilization ... ecological emergency ... defense of our planet ... our children’s future”; without forgetting to emphasize that “the political will for the renovation and the construction of ecological houses, neighborhoods and even cities represents for industry a formidable growth opportunity” (Gérard Mestrallet, president of Suez, “L’environnement, catalyseur d’innovation et de croissance”, *Le Monde*, December 21, 2007). To put the finishing touches to this picture and also in the interests of *parity*, we shall also quote a directive on sustainable development issued by the group Veolia-Environnement that is no less enthusiastic: “‘Green’ construction and renovation are in progress, it is an immense, abundant, thrilling and very promising market, so much so that the new El Dorado of today is *clean tech* construction, that is, clean technologies with reference to the imperious need to reduce the carbon footprint of all the world’s buildings, in conformance with the established road map” (Geneviève Ferone, 2030, *le krach écologique*, 2008).

XXII

The role that has always been played by wars over the course of modern history to accelerate the fusion of State and economy is well known. And it is precisely a war that must be waged in order to conquer a nature that has been ravaged by the previous operations of economic rationality and replace it with a integrally produced world that is better-adapted to alienated life.¹ One of the American propagandists for the ecological-bureaucratic reconversion of capitalism (less hallucinatory than Rifkin with his end of work and his hydrogen economy), Lester Brown, has explicitly called for a “wartime mobilization” and has proposed the model of the reconversion of the productive apparatus that was carried out during the Second World War; he did, however, highlight the difference that, since this time it is a question of “saving a threatened planet and a civilization in danger”, the “economic reconstruction” must not be temporary but permanent. Recalling “the year 1942, which witnessed the greatest expansion of industrial production in the country’s history” (an American poet who had served as a soldier in the European theatre summarized it this way: “For every artillery shell that Krupp fires, General Motors returns four”), he is thrilled by the memory of such a total mobilization, with its rationing and its authoritarian organization: “That mobilization of resources showed in a matter of months that a country and, in fact, the world could rebuild its economy quickly if it was only convinced of the need to do so”. Excited by the example of the vast massacre provided by the industry of that era, he expressed in the style of *public relations* what the previous era had expressed through indoctrination: “We have the technology, the economic instruments and the financial resources necessary [...] to steer our society away from its declining course and to put it on a path that would allow it to continue to pursue economic progress” (*Plan B 2.0: Rescuing A Planet Under Stress And A Civilization In Trouble*, 2006).

This almost perfect prototype of the ecolocrat, a catastrophist expert for almost forty years, is certainly not the only person who “has a plan” (others speak, for example, of a “Climate Marshall Plan”), but his has the incontestable merit of being formulated in the American style, with a straightforward brutality and an absolutely clear conscience, without the rhetorical precautions and the circumlocutions that entangle the left wing statist and the members of the more or less anti-growth civil society movement here in Europe. Written according to the standards of bureaucratic management (graphs, tables, statistics and calculations of financing various projects; we can even acquaint ourselves with the cost, “due to the loss of potential income”, of the “diminution of the Intellectual Coefficient linked to prenatal mercury toxicity”: 8.7 billion dollars), it does not attempt to conceal the fact that it is calling for a concentration of power: “What the world needs now is not more oil, but more government”. This “road map” for an ecologically correct disaster capitalism has not, however, offended anybody, so advanced now is the *education* of

¹ “The ecological state of emergency is simultaneously a *war economy* that mobilizes production in the service of common interests as defined by the State, and an *economic war* against the threat posed by protest movements that might unequivocally criticize it” (“Appeal to All Those Who Would Rather Do Away with Harmful Phenomena than Manage Them” [1990], *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, No. 15, April 1992).

the public recommended by this same road map (“The need for media governance also ushers in the parallel need for political governance”). So Lester Brown can be quoted favorably, by La-touche for instance, at the same time that he brags about being aware of a hypothetical threat of “ecofascism”.

An almost universal consensus has been established, then, in just a few years, among the defenders of “our civilization” regarding the need for reinforced *governance* to confront the total ecological crisis; and it is necessary to deduce from this fact that the “neoliberal” detour is coming to an end, during which capitalism restored the profitability of its investments by drastically reducing not only its wage bill but also its “extraordinary state expenditures”. It has at times been attempted to precisely date this change of course, placing it in retrospect in the year 2005, since after that date the signs of an ideological *aggiornamento* (modernization) in the sphere of power began to multiply; in particular, the “Stern Report” of October 2006: “This document removes ecology from the political arena, occupied for thirty years by the NGOs and the anti-liberal [*sic*] leftist parties, and definitively inserts it into the heart of the development of contemporary capitalism” (Jean-Michel Valentin, *Écologie et Gouvernance mondiale*, 2007). But in reality the open collaboration of environmentalist groups, NGOs, corporations and government officials goes back in certain sectors to the nineties.

The attempt at an ecological-bureaucratic reorganization that is currently underway is by no means a cold-blooded “rationalization” procedure. It is taking place *in the midst of the catastrophe*, since in the heat of the burning world the various bureaucracies responsible for the specialized management of each sector of mass society are approaching their *fusion point*. The already initiated process can only be accelerated by the financial crisis that is putting an end to a speculative cycle, but which is, in itself, more a manifestation of the fact that the approach of the ecological deadlines announced so often will dissuade capitalism (much more effectively than any grandiloquent denunciations of “financial madness”) from giving itself too much credit. (In this way, the collapse of real estate speculation in the United States is also an effect of the end of cheap oil.) The project of capitalism’s ecological adjustment arrives in time for the reorganization of production, especially that of the vast sector of “public works”—which includes “civil engineering”—the heavy industry of a “new industrial revolution” whose utopian model is Dubai, “which produces its water through desalination, regulates its temperature, filters the sun’s rays, controls all the parameters of life in order to realize the ideal oasis; where time, climate and the world tarry in a perfect present” (Hervé Juvin, *Produire le monde. Pour une croissance écologique*, 2008). In this post-historical utopia, the dream of an “escape from nature” (“The supreme achievement is in our grasp: that nothing will ever happen, anywhere, ever, that we have not decided ourselves”, *ibid.*), survival, organized and regulated *as a whole* by disaster management, will be sold to us *at retail prices* in the production of commodities.

XXIII

The bureaucracy of experts that emerged with the development of planning, manufactures for all the managers of domination a common language and the representations thanks to which the latter understand and justify their own activity. With its diagnoses and forecasts, formulated in the neo-language of rational calculation, it cultivates the illusion of a technoscientific control of “problems”. Defending the program of an integrally managed survival is its job. It is this bureaucracy that regularly issues alerts and warnings, counting on the emergency it proclaims to enable it to be more directly associated in the management of domination. In its campaign for the establishment of a state of emergency, it has never lacked the support of all the left wing statist and other citizenists, and will henceforth hardly encounter any resistance from the managers of the economy, since most of them view the perspective of an endless disaster as a permanent resurgence of production through the quest for “ecocompatibility”. One thing that is now certain is that when the time comes for the application of the old Keynesian recipe of public works programs, summarized in the formula “digging holes in order to fill them up again”, there will be enough “holes” already dug, devastation to repair, wastes to recycle, pollution to clean up, etc. (“We will have to repair what has never been repaired, manage what no one has ever before had to manage”, *ibid.*).

The training of this new “labor corps” is already on a war footing. Just as the *New Deal* obtained the support of practically all the leftist intellectuals and militants in the United States, the new ecological course of bureaucratic capitalism is mobilizing on a world scale all the “kind-hearted *apparatchiks*” of environmental and humanitarian just causes. The latter are young, specialists, enthusiastic, competent and ambitious: trained in battle, in the NGOs and other associations, in leadership and organization, they feel capable of “driving things forward”. Convinced that they embody the higher interests of humanity, and of having history on their side, they are equipped with an absolutely clear conscience and, as if that were not enough, the knowledge that the laws are on their side: the laws that are already on the books and all those which they hope to promulgate. For they want more laws and regulations, and this is where they agree with the rest of the progressives, “anti-liberals” and militants of the State party, for whom “social critique” consists, in the style of Bourdieu, in calling upon the “ruled” to “defend the State” against its “neoliberal dismantling”.

Nothing is more indicative of the way the catastrophism of the experts is something different from a “becoming conscious” of the real disaster of alienated life than the way it strives to make every aspect of life and each detail of personal behavior into an object of state control, subject to rules, regulations and prohibitions. Every expert converted to catastrophism knows he is a depository of a fragment of the true faith, of the impersonal rationality that is the essential ideal of the State. When he directs his accusations and recommendations at political leaders, the expert is aware of the fact that he represents the higher interests of collective management, the imperatives of the survival of the mass society. (He will speak of the “political will” that is required when referring to this aspect of the issue.) The management of the experts is Statist not only because

of its habits, because only a reinforced State can apply its solutions: it is structurally Statist, in all its methods, its intellectual categories and its “membership criteria”. These “Jesuits of the State” have their idealism (their “spiritualism”, as Marx called it), the conviction that they are working for the salvation of the planet; but this idealism often reverts in everyday practice to a vulgar materialism, in the eyes of which there is not one single spontaneous manifestation of life that cannot be reduced to the status of a passive object susceptible to being administered: in order to impose the program of bureaucratic management (“producing nature”) it is necessary to combat and eliminate everything that exists independently, without the aid of technology, and which therefore must be irrational (as were, until just yesterday, the critiques of industrial society that proclaimed its foreseeable disaster).

The cult of impersonal scientific objectivity, of *knowledge without a subject*, is the religion of the bureaucracy. And among its favorite devotions is, for obvious reasons, statistics, the State science par excellence, which effectively attained this status in the militarist and absolutist Prussia of the 18th century, which was also the first society, as Mumford observed, to apply on a grand scale to education the uniformity and impersonalism of the modern public school system. Just as at Los Alamos the laboratory was transformed into a prison, what the world-laboratory is now announcing, as the experts represent it, is a *barracks ecology*. The fetishism of data and the puerile respect for anything that can be presented in the form of an equation has nothing to do with the fear of error, but rather with the fear of the truth, which the non-expert can formulate without any need for numbers. This is why the non-expert must be educated and informed so that he can submit in advance to the ecological-scientific authority that will dictate to him the new rules, which are so necessary for the smooth functioning of the social machine. In the voices of those who passionately repeat the statistics that are disseminated by catastrophist propaganda, it is not revolt that resounds, but submission in advance to the states of emergency, the acceptance of the disciplinary regimes to come, and support for the bureaucratic power that pretends, through the use of coercive measures, to assure collective survival.

XXIV

If we were to subscribe to the formula of Nougé (“Intelligence has to have *teeth*, because it *attacks* problems”), we would be tempted to concede only a very mediocre intelligence to Latouche, the leading thinker of the “anti-growth” movement, that ideology that presumes to be a radical critique of economic development and its “sustainable” products. He provides evidence of a distinctly professorial talent, which verges sometimes on genius, of being able to make a mess of everything he touches and to transform any critical truth, by translating it into the neo-language of the anti-growth tendency, into an insipid and sanctimonious vulgarity. We must not, however, assume that he deserves all the credit for a suave and edifying dullness that is the result of a certain kind of politics: the one the *left-wing experts* use to attempt to mobilize their troops by recruiting all those who want to believe that we can “escape from development” (that is, from capitalism) by remaining within it. We shall therefore refrain from judging the writings of Latouche as personal works (in this respect, the genius of language is more cruel than any judgment could ever be: his prose faithfully reflects the content of his works). That such a stew, in which all the clichés of eco-compatible citizenism float, could be presented as the bearer of any kind of subversion—even if it were only of a “cognitive” sort—itself gives you an idea of the reigning conformism. On the other hand, with regard to our present topic, Latouche is perfect: he is a master when it comes to flattering the good conscience and nourishing the illusions of the subordinate personnel who still cling to “the social fabric” and who will soon be hired for jobs in the disaster management industry. This is what he calls, at the beginning of his most recent breviary (*Petit traité de la décroissance sereine*, 2007), supplying “a useful working tool for any executive director of any group or any committed politician, particularly at the local or regional level”.

It should be recalled that the program of those who want to “curtail economic growth”, as it is conceived by Latouche as well as both the decaying citizenism and ecologism in search of a way to rebuild, is reminiscent of the one sketched in 1995 by the American Rifkin in his book *The End of Work*. Even then he intended to “announce the transition to a post-commodity and post-wage labor society” by way of the development of what Rifkin calls the “third sector” (which roughly translates into French as the “associative movement” or “social economy”); and by the encouragement towards that end of a “mass social movement” “capable of putting pressure on both the private sector and the public authorities” “to achieve the transfer of a part of the enormous benefits of the new information economy towards the creation of social capital and the reconstruction of civil society”. But the anti-growth movement is instead counting on the harsh necessities of the ecological and energy crises, on the basis of which they propose to found so many other *virtues*, in order to put “pressure” on industrial corporations and the States. Meanwhile, the militants of the anti-growth movement must practice what they preach and show how pedagogically austere they are, in the vanguard of a kind of rationing baptized as “voluntary simplicity”.

Precisely because the advocates of curtailing economic growth present themselves as the bearers of the most resolute will to “escape from development”, it is among them that one can best

measure both the depth of the guilt they have to feel (inverted in self-flagellation and commandments to virtue) and their lasting imprisonment in the categories of “scientific” argumentation. The thermodynamic *fatum* fortunately exempts us from having to choose which road to take: it is the “law of entropy” which constitutes the only alternative to the road of curtailing economic growth. With this Egg of Columbus, laid by their “great economist” Georgescu-Roegen, the supporters of the anti-growth movement are confident they have the irrefutable argument that cannot but convince at least businessmen and leaders of good faith. If not, the consequences, which are predictable and calculable, will compel them to make the inevitable decisions (as Cochet says, whose book *Pétrole apocalypse* often quotes Latouche: “At one hundred dollars a barrel for petroleum, civilization will have to change”).

Defining society as thermoindustrial likewise permits the discounting of everything now taking place in regard to coercion and recruitment, and everything that does not contribute, or only makes a small contribution, to the exhaustion of energy resources. All such factors are happily passed over, especially when one is an accomplice in public education or other forums. Attributing all our problems to the “thermoindustrial” nature of this society is therefore easy enough, as well as simplistic, for the purpose of satisfying the critical appetite of arriviste fools and cretins, the last remnants of ecologism and the “associative movement”, which comprise the *grassroots* of the anti-growth movement. The care taken not to offend these grassroots with overly crude truths, by flattering them with a smooth transition to “the joyous rapture of shared austerity” and the “paradise of a convivial curtailment of economic growth”, leads Latouche, who is not after all an idiot, to such voluntary poverty, words of wisdom on the electoral circuit or papal encyclical as the following: “It is becoming increasingly more likely that, beyond a certain point, the growth of GDP translates into a reduction of well-being”; or even, after having dared to impute the desolation of the world to the “market system”: “All of this confirms the doubts we have expressed about the incompatibility of capitalism with a society of the curtailment of economic growth” (*Le pari de la décroissance*, 2006).

Although most advocates of the curtailment of economic growth feel that it is premature or inadvisable to formally create an “Anti-Growth Party” and that it is preferable at this point to attempt to “influence debate”, it is nonetheless the case that there is a kind of party waiting in the wings, with its informal hierarchy, its rank and file militants, its intellectuals and experts, its leaders and its smooth-talking politicians. All of this works marvelously in the virtuous conventions of a citizenism which it is careful not to upset with any sort of critical excess: above all, it is crucial not to offend anyone at *Le Monde diplomatique*, to be nice to the left and parliamentarism (“The radical rejection of representative ‘democracy’ has something excessive about it”, *ibid.*) and, more generally, to progressivism, by not giving the impression of indulging in nostalgia, technophobia, or anything that might be considered to be *reactionary*. The “transition” to the “escape from development” must be conducted vaguely enough so as not to impede the scams and con games that are ritually denounced as “professional politics”: “The compromises that may have to be made regarding the means of transition must not lose sight of the goals with respect to which we must not make any compromises” (*Petit traité de la décroissance sereine*, 2007). Latouche recites these goals in a style worthy of the schools for Party cadres: “We must recall these eight objectives that are capable of unleashing a virtuous circle of serene, convivial and sustainable curtailment of economic growth: reevaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocate, reduce, reuse, and recycle” (*ibid.*). With regard to what is to be reused and recycled, Latouche is the first to set an example, repeating again and again from one book to another the same pious

wishes, statistics, indices, references, examples and quotations. Going around and around in his “virtuous circle”, he nonetheless tries to innovate and has thus enriched his catalog with two more Rs (reconceptualize and relocate) since the era when the glorious proposal to “undo development, rebuild the world” was issued under the aegis of UNESCO (*Survivre au développement : De la décolonisation de l’imaginaire économique à la construction d’une société alternative*, 2004). What is not so easy to understand is the absence of a ninth commandment, to reappropriate, having cleansed the word of any revolutionary taint (the old “Expropriate the expropriators!”); thus decontaminated, it nonetheless fits like a glove on the expedited enterprise of recuperation to which the anti-growth movement has devoted itself in order to supply itself in the blink of an eye with a gallery of presentable precedents (where we now find “an anarchist tradition within Marxism, rejuvenated by the Frankfurt School, councilism and situationism”, *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine*).

According to Latouche, the “gamble of curtailing economic growth [...] consists in thinking that the attraction of the convivial utopia combined with the pressure of the requirements for change is capable of creating a situation that is favorable for a ‘decolonization of the imagination’ and arousing sufficient ‘virtuous behaviors’ that are conducive to a reasonable solution: ecological democracy” (*Le pari de la décroissance*). But, with respect to the “requirements for change”, we see clearly just what the advocates of the curtailment of economic growth are good for—to take over, with their calls for self-discipline, from the propaganda for rationing, so that, for example, industrial agriculture will not run out of water for irrigation—but on the other hand it is harder to understand just what attraction could be exercised by a “utopia” whose “semi-electoral” program claims to make room for happiness and pleasure by proposing to “stimulate the ‘production’ of relational goods”. Certainly, no one would precipitously put their faith in lyrical outbursts about shrinking futures;¹ but there is hardly any danger that such a thing would happen when these beggars appear with their funereal faces and begin to declaim, with the enthusiasm of a socio-cultural emcee, their promises of the “joy of life” and convivial serenity. The unfortunate attempts to inject a little fantasy into their austerity are as inspired as those of Besset, who sings of the beauty of surrealism as a prefect at the inauguration of the René Char library in a certain provincial city. Happiness seems to be such a new idea to these people, and the idea that they have of it is so similar to the joys promised by a macrobiotic banquet, that there is no other remedy than to suppose that they will die of boredom or that some *casseur de pub*² has called their attention to this fact. Now they are basically devoted, particularly in their “theoretical” journal *Entropy*, to proving that they are big fans of art and poetry. So now we are seeing this in posters and flyers (“On Sunday afternoon at the offices of the groups of Moulins-sur-Allier, from 3:30 to 5:00, the club of local poets and the association of Breton sculptors will present an entertaining performance, followed by an ecological snack”).

The ideology of the curtailment of economic growth was born in the milieu of experts, among whom, in the name of realism, they would like to include in a “bio-economic” accounting those “real costs to society” incurred by the destruction of nature. It preserves the indelible stamp of its origins: despite all the usual talk about the “re-enchantment of the world”, its aspiration, in the

¹ “... *lendemains que décroissent*”, an allusion to the “singing futures” (“*des lendemains que chantent*”), an old slogan of the French Communist Party. (Translator’s note from the Spanish edition).

² *Casseurs de pub* (“Destroyers of Advertising”) is a French magazine edited by Victor Cheynet whose views are similar to the postulates of the movement for the curtailment of economic growth. (Translator’s note from the Spanish edition).

style of any technocrat of the Lester Brown type, remains that of “internalizing the costs in order to achieve an improved management of the biosphere”. It preaches voluntary rationing to the rank and file, to set a good example, but demands from government measures from the highest levels: redistribution of the tax burden (“ecotaxes”), subsidies, regulations. If on occasion it ventures to profess anticapitalism—in total contradiction of proposals such as that of a “universal basic income”, for example—it never dares to profess antistatism. Its vaguely libertarian tint only serves to placate part of the public, and to provide a touch of very consensual and “anti-totalitarian” leftism. In this manner the unreal alternative between “ecofascism” and “ecodemocracy” serves primarily to avoid any mention of the bureaucratic reorganization currently in progress, in which one *serenely* participates by agitating in favor of consensual regimentation, hyper-socialization and conflict resolution. The fear that is expressed in this childish dream of a “transition” without struggle is much more a fear of some disorders in which freedom and the truth could be embodied and cease to be academic questions, rather than a fear of the catastrophe the threat of which it brandishes in order to make their leaders repent. Which is why, quite logically, this *curtailment of the growth of consciousness* ends up finding what it was looking for in the virtual world, where one can, without feeling guilty, travel “while having only a limited impact on the environment” (*Entropy*, No. 3, Fall 2007); as long as, however, one forgets that in 2007, according to a recent study, “the information technology sector, worldwide, has made just as much of a contribution to climate change as air transport” (*Le Monde*, April 13–14, 2008).

XXV

However much Latouche manages to refrain from excess in carrying out his “iconoclastic duty”, the movement to curtail economic growth also has its revisionists, who invite it to dare to appear for what it really is and to once and for all beware of that subversive attire that is so unbecoming to it: “An initial proposal for consolidating the idea of a peaceful curtailment of economic growth would be to clearly and unequivocally renounce revolution as a goal. To damage, destroy or overthrow the industrial world seems to me to be not only a dangerous folly, but also an open appeal to violence, just like the project of overthrowing the social classes was in Marxist theory” (Alexandre Genko, “La décroissance, une utopie sans danger?”, *Entropy*, No. 4, Spring 2008). Even Besset himself, despite the fact that he is the spokesman for Hulot and a supporter of “*la Grenelle de l’environnement*” as “a first step in a project of transition towards an ecological, social and cultural transformation of society”, finds it difficult to follow this up with a more moderate caveat: “Considering the magnitude and the complexity of the task, long-winded proposals or doctrinaire catechisms will not exactly be of much help.... However much we accompany the curtailment of economic growth with sympathetic adjectives—convivial, equitable, happy—the thing will not be pleasant ... the transition will be terrible, and the break with the past will be painful” (*ibid.*). These bitter warnings make it clear enough in their own way why the recommendations of the movement for the curtailment of economic growth by no means constitute a program whose content will provide an opportunity for debate, and concerning what kind of compulsory musical score will determine how they play their minuet (*decrescendo cantabile*), by way of an *swan song* for an epoch of industrial society: a “new art of consumption” among the ruins of commodity abundance.¹

The image of what was not so long ago referred to as the “free world”, has actually hardly varied at all since Yalta: that democratic conformism, armored in its certainties, its commodities and its enviable technologies, was certainly somewhat shaken for a moment by the revolutionary unrest of 1968, but the “fall of the wall” seemed to assure it of a kind of eternal life (some then spoke expeditiously of the “end of history”) and it thought it could congratulate itself that its poor relatives would want to have their turn, and as soon as possible, at access to such delights. Later, however, it had to begin to experience unease at the number of cousins it had, especially the most distant ones, and to ask itself if they were really related, when they recklessly set about increasing their “carbon footprints”. What disturbs the whole world is no longer only the classic scenario of overpopulation, where, despite the increase in productivity, food supplies would prove to be insufficient for meeting the needs of a growing population, but an unprecedented situation in

¹ “Thus, at the very moment that the flight forward of industrial society is irreversibly leading it to collapse, it has chosen to privilege the exchange of Jesuitical arguments about control—scientific, or perhaps civil—over the merits of the public management of this collapse or over the precautions that will have to be adopted in order to make this collapse bearable. How is it possible to see this as anything but a controversy over the customs or table manners that one has decided to observe in the pool of Medusa?” (René Riesel, “Communiqué” of February 9, 2001, at Montpellier, *Aveux complets sur les véritables mobiles...*, 2001).

which, with a stable population, the threat is an excess of modern people living modern lives: “If the Chinese or the Indians have to live like us....” Faced with this “catastrophic reality”, the technological panaceas with which we still want to deceive ourselves (nuclear fusion, human transgenesis, colonization of the oceans, space exodus to other planets) hardly bear the aspect of radiant utopias, except for a few enlightened ones, but instead look like palliatives that will in any event come too late. It will therefore be necessary to continue to preach about “hard sacrifices” and “painful breaks” to populations that are going to have to “decline by several stages in the scale of food, mobility, production and lifestyle” (Besset); and, with respect to the new industrial powers, there will have to be a return to protectionism in the name of the fight against “ecological *dumping*”, in the hope that as a result there would be a more conscious appraisal of the “environmental costs” and the measures that should be adopted to deal with them (a reorientation that is currently embodied in China by Pan Yue).

The “urgent requirements” that the realism of the experts takes pleasure in repeatedly proclaiming are exclusively those that impose the preservation and planet-wide generalization of a condemned industrial way of life. The fact that they can only be applied within a *system of needs* whose dismantling would allow us to confront, amidst the insane complications of the managed society and its technological orthopedics, the vital problems that only liberty can address and solve, and the fact that this rediscovery of material obligations confronted without intermediaries could be, in itself, in the activity itself, a form of emancipation, are ideas that none of those people who speak to us of the immense dangers created by our entry into the *anthropocene era* dare to openly and clearly expound. When someone ventures to timidly suggest something of this kind—that depriving ourselves of the comforts of industrial life might not be such a painful sacrifice, but rather the contrary, an immense relief and a sensation of finally returning to life—he is generally pressured to retract his statements, and he is aware of the fact that he would otherwise be tarred with the brush of antidemocratic terrorism, or even of totalitarianism or ecofascism, if he were to follow his argument to its logical conclusions; this explains the proliferation of works in which certain pertinent observations are diluted in an ocean of reassuring considerations. Almost nobody conceives of the advocacy of their ideas not as a banal strategy to win over public opinion on the model of *lobbying* but rather as a commitment within a historical conflict, in which one strikes without seeking any other ally than an “offensive and defensive pact with the truth”, as a Hungarian intellectual said in 1956. For this reason one cannot but feel terrified at the unity of points of view, the absence of any independent thought and of any really dissident voice. If we take modern history into account, even if it were only the last century, it is dizzying to note, on the one hand, the variety and the audacity of so many positions, hypotheses and contradictory opinions, of whatever kind, and, on the other hand, what has now replaced all of that. In response to the brainwashing to which so many still living protagonists have voluntarily delivered themselves, in the best cases they will sometimes respond reasonably to these historical works, but they will feel that they belong to paleontology or the natural sciences, so far removed are these authors from imagining that the elements they bring to light could have any critical use today.

The taste for respectable conformism, and the hatred and the panic-stricken fear of history, except as a univocal *signpost*, have reached such a point that compared to what today passes for a member of the civil society movement—with his moderate and polite indignations, his priestly hypocrisy, his cowardice in the face of any *direct* conflict—any left wing intellectual of the fifties or sixties would almost seem like an indomitable libertarian brimming over with combativity,

imagination and humor. Seeing such mental standardization, one could very well believe that one is seeing the result of the activities of a thought police. In reality, support for consensus is the spontaneous product of the feeling of powerlessness, of the anxiety that it implies and the need to seek the protection of the organized collectivity via a complete abandonment to the total society. To cast any doubt whatsoever upon the certainties democratically sanctioned by general consent—the benefits of internet culture or those of high tech medicine—could cause one to be suspected of a deviation with respect to received opinion, it could even lead to independent thought or even a judgment passed against alienated life as a whole. And who can be allowed to do such a thing? All of this cannot but bring to mind the motto of the militant's submission, *perinde ac cadaver*, as it was formulated by Trotsky: "The Party is always right". But whereas in the totalitarian bureaucratic societies coercion was perceived as such by the masses, and it was a terrible privilege of militants and *apparatchiks* to have to believe in the fiction that a choice was possible—for or against the socialist fatherland, the working class, the Party—that is, to have to constantly put to the test an orthodoxy that was never really secure, that privilege has been democratized today, although with less dramatic effect: no opposition to the good of society, or to what society declares to be necessary. It is a civic duty to be healthy, to be culturally up-to-date, to be connected to the net, etc. Ecological imperatives are the latest irrefutable argument. Who is not, of course, opposed to pedophilia—but, above all, who is opposed to the preservation of the social organization that will allow humanity, the planet and the biosphere to be saved? Here is the real mother lode for an already vigorous and widespread "citizen" personality.

In France, what is especially noteworthy is that this frightened submission adopts a particularly oppressive, almost pathological form; but in order to explain it there is no need to resort to a psychology of national character: it is simply because here conformism has had to work overtime in order to shore up its certainties. Since it is necessary for it to condemn in advance the denial that was inflicted on it forty years ago, that critique of modern society and of its "system of illusions" delivered by the revolutionary uprising of May 1968, and which fleetingly penetrated the collective consciousness, inscribed on the ephemeral *public space* that gave rise to its wild existence. A rival of Latouche in the movement to curtail economic growth, who emphatically declared himself to be "republican" and "democratic", that is, statist and electoralist, thus expressed his fear that "extremist and maximalist theories and practices" would reinforce in the youth those defects that appear to come natural to them, "such as hatred of institutions or the wholesale rejection of society" (Vincent Cheynet, *Le Choc de la décroissance*, 2008).

XXVI

Subjected to a campaign of exaggeration every ten years, and this time converted, *to put an end to it once and for all*, into a deafening racket, the scandal of the “cultural revolution” that the French May supposedly was recuperates, augmented by the contributions of a multitude of false witnesses, the interpretation of the events which was immediately offered at the time by those who did not deny that they were *reactionaries*. Although the relative restraint shown in the repression that followed the crisis certainly did not in any way resemble the Bloody Week,¹ there was no lack of either sociologists (some of whom were quite mistreated in the agitation that preceded the uprising) or commentators and journalist-cops who rapidly vomited up their bile. Concerning that movement without either leaders or representatives (but which some individuals sought to manufacture as soon as possible), in which the most insignificant public buildings were occupied and which, nonetheless, was so lacking in rationality that no one ever even thought of investing the *Champs-Élysées* or the National Assembly, what can be said about it that will deprive it of its ability to frighten people, except that it was in reality nothing but a pantomime, a psychodrama of *baby-boomers* playing at revolution, a recreational release valve that the “consumer society” offered its *spoiled children*, that is, a non-event in the final analysis? It is an enduring irony that “the May events” has become the usual name given to the obsessive vacuity of this non-event.

Piling up on this inaugural falsification that was the stupid journalistic image of the “student commune”, the successive layers of false representations confidently deposited on the occasion of each commemoration tell us instead about the epoch that produced them, and about the persistent difficulty in assimilating the insult that the uprising inflicted on the acuity of the analysts of that era, including all its intellectuals as well as its PhDs in revolution. But it likewise shows that what had led to so much effort and so much controversy over so many years had not ceased to be perceived as a vague threat of dissolution of the entire existing order: it had finally come to discussing, following the model of revisionism *a la Furet*—for whom the French Revolution unfortunately went wrong because of the existence of revolutionaries—a “demonization of power which is corroding the pillars of coexistence and discrediting the very possibility of a transformative politics” (“Mai 68, quarante ans après”, *Le Débat*, March-April 2008). Since the irritating “mystery of ‘68” still involves the question of how, starting with a very restricted agitation, whose declared goal was the destruction of the University, so many people enthusiastically participated in the critique in acts of “everything that can be criticized”, it will be understood that almost all of its historical enemies—certified experts or actors credentialed by their frequent appearances on TV—will henceforth join a reassuring consensus in favor of the idea that it is finally nothing but an “impossible legacy”, according to the judicious formula of one of these experts. One could not be more faithful to the truth nor is there any better way to express it than to say that that attempt to reject all the different forms of alienation, old and new, has left nothing for the use of

¹ May 21–27, 1871, when the Paris Commune was crushed and thousands of its supporters were executed by the troops of Versailles. (Note from the Spanish edition.)

those who, in order to condemn it or to praise it, have ever more confidently proclaimed that the main effect of the movement was to overthrow the archaisms that still restricted French society and which prevented it from carrying out its comprehensive modernization.

This capitalist modernization, well advanced under Gaullism, probably would have been carried out anyway, but the various leftist sects played a supporting role in it that was falsely attributed to the uprising. It is known that only after the end of the uprising, and during the early days of the return to order, once their organizations were reconstituted which had been dissolved by a State that was looking for an enemy whose motives it could understand—and which it opportunely discovered in these sectarian and hierarchical groups, whose methods and goals were radically *opposed* to the essence of what the occupations movement was and what it had attempted to accomplish—these leftist groupuscules acquired, in just a few years, an influence and a *visibility* of which they could have only dreamed previously. What they did with this influence was invariably grotesque and revolting; some, who had not all become senators, believing that May was a *dress rehearsal* of the seizure of the Winter Palace, while others, convinced that they were the embodiment of a new Resistance and that they were on the road *towards civil war*, dreamed of popular tribunals and summary executions. All of this collapsed very quickly, but by way of the decomposition of all their political illusions and ambitions, which they renounced without, however, renouncing their style and their worst methods, the leftists managed to create a new identity for themselves in a kind of “cultural leftism” whose impact, and whose unequalled contribution to our finally liberated and truly modern customs, is recognized by the whole world. There are those who often express how fortunate it was that, in its stage of delirious mimicry with regard to the military imagination of bureaucratic regimentation, French leftism did not join the flight forward into terrorism, as occurred shortly afterwards in Italy and Germany. One can, however, frame the question somewhat differently and discern that its sectarianism, its ideological dementia, its sacrificial militantism, in short, the whole ensemble of the practices and effective reality of these groups was sufficient, without the need to proceed to the propaganda of the deed, to produce the same effects, by *destroying* a revolutionary generation in the making, infecting it with ideology and inducing it to loathe subversion as a result of its repugnant play acting. This was the first contribution made by leftism, as negative as it was decisive, to the success of the modernization project whose course had been led to a temporary detour by May ‘68.

XXVII

Gustav Janouch relates Kafka's disappointed comments after watching a workers demonstration pass by, its flags flying in the wind: "These people are so convinced and so sure of themselves, and are in such a good mood.... They rule the street and think therefore that they rule the world. But they are mistaken. Behind them are the secretaries, the officials and the professional politicians, all the modern sultans, for whom they are paving the way to power... The revolution is evaporating and all that remains is the mud of a new bureaucracy". (It was later in the same passage that he would state: "The chains of a tortured humanity are made of office paper".) Although very muddy, what will be left after the evaporation of the revolution this time cannot be defined as a "new bureaucracy". The replacement of the personnel of domination took place, of course, but in the usual way of a new generation taking the place of the old in the framework of the existing society. (This was at least understood by the Minister of the Interior during the period of the reestablishment of order when he said, sarcastically enough: "All of these young leftists will end up as deputies or mainstream journalists".) If the revolution was lost in the muck, this was due to the promotion of new customs, propagated by those same people who had devoted their principle efforts to containing and channeling the flood and which were rapidly adopted by those who had been their spectators to the end; what is most significant is the fact that this spread of pleasant *customized freedoms* that constitute the customs of the slaves of an advanced society is presented by most commentators, even when they attempt to be critical of such a "market individualism", as the specific content of that unfinished revolution; not as one of its effects, in conformance with a "classic" process of recuperation, but as its essence and its most profound meaning.

Ever since social revolutions have existed and ever since they have been defeated, we have witnessed restorations that have employed the most varied methods; but we have never before seen them succeed, so rapidly and with such little repression, in carrying out such a disarmament of consciousness. Anyone who took part in the revolutionary unrest of May and then saw Paris in the autumn of 1968 would understand immediately, unless he preferred to deceive himself, what a variety of faces the counterrevolution adopted on that occasion, and would get a sense of just what they all had in common. Along the endless vistas of asphalt streets, it was not so much the ubiquity of the police that characterized the reestablishment of order as the murky happiness of the Directory: a kind of revanchist binge dictated their *liberated* behaviors to the *Muscadins et Merveilleuses*¹ of a relieved middle class, all the more prepared to surrender body and soul to the *revolutionary fashion*, and especially to that of the liberation of lifestyles, insofar as it had aspired for several years to enjoy a lifestyle that was more in keeping with the various appliances it had been able to acquire. This was the occasion when leftism made its second contribution, this

¹ *Muscadins* ("dandies") *et Merveilleuses* ("fabulous divas"); *Fops, Incredibles* ... names given during the French Revolution to the realists, who called attention to themselves by their affected and elegant attire that verged on the ridiculous, and who made their first appearance in the counterrevolutionary Paris of the Directory. (Note from the Spanish edition.)

time a positive one, to modernization. But it was first necessary for its most extremist variants in the microbureaucratic imposture to reach, by way of demagoguery and deception, their point of putrefaction.

Concerning the manner in which part of that “untamed youth”—which was the only fragile “heir” of May—joined the manipulative activism of leftism, it has been characterized as “a kind of ‘after the fact’ Leninism” (Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, 2002). Nonetheless, for such a recruitment campaign to be successful, leftism had to add a great deal of adventurism and spontaneist demagoguery to its Leninism; or should we say, its Leninism-Stalinism, since it was primarily the Maoists who excelled in this genre, as they would later with regard to media repentance, the promotion of youth culture and festive makeup. At the vanguard of this process of decomposition, an unprecedented “anarcho-maoist” current attempted, as early as 1970, to diversify its range of influence and to confer a more *pop culture* image on the squalid routine of the militant, adapting the idea of a “revolution of everyday life” to the sinister blindness about the “liberation” of Vietnam on the part of the local Stalinists and other monstrosities regarding the “Cultural Revolution”. At the same time, the importation of the American-style “counterculture” spread the worst clichés of a slovenly consumption, spiced up with the drugs of transgression, in an ideological *melting-pot* that here in France, and perhaps also in its country of origin, in any case signified an impressive step backwards. All of this culminated during the course of the seventies in a mass hedonism, conventional insofar as it was proudly displayed, to which the most fragile element of the modern social critique contributed its touch of complacent “subjectivity”.² The renunciation on the part of the leftists of their most draconian ambitions for revolutionary leadership was utilized above all, in the name of certain conveniently rediscovered “individual liberties”, to make up for the time wasted in militant mortification in order to adopt the effervescent style of consumption that would from then on be customary. In this way, the obscene safety valve of the “slave festival” gave way after a few years, as it spread to more and more layers of society, to a *festive slavery* patronized by the government.

The suddenness and the historical violence of the French May implied the requirement that the “reestablishment of order” would be, more than just a restoration, the accelerated perfection of the new order of the commodity against which May had rebelled. In order to be complete, this brief sketch of the role that the various leftisms played in this respect must also mention the manner in which the latter, by recruiting the bulk of their troops from the student milieu, applied to their future cadres, who were manufactured as quickly as possible to respond to certain growing needs, techniques of training and manipulation that anticipated those that now prevail in the world of the “enterprise” and in much of social relations. In fact, by imposing a kind of *interdisciplinary program*, the leftists in effect contributed, where the University still lacked such expertise, to the inculcation of new aptitudes and to the forging of the necessary character traits for the graduates of this *dual degree program*, preparing them for the optimal execution of the tasks that would henceforth be their responsibility in the continuation of the modernization process; the flexibility they were made to display in order to submit to the tortuous political lines pronounced by their respective leaderships could finally be fully utilized. Some sociologists, who had passed from a

² “The true vanguard of adaptation, leftism (and especially where it was least connected to the political lie) preached, then, practically all the impostures that are now the common currency of alienated behavior. In the name of the struggle against the routine and against boredom, it denigrated any persistent effort, and any appropriation, which requires patience, of real abilities: subjective excellence was supposed to be, like the revolution, instantaneous” (Jaime Semprun, *L’Abîme se repeuple*, 1997).

“critical sociology” to a “sociology of critique”, more attentive to the *positive dimensions of the social bond*, have attempted long after the fact to give a theoretical form to the phenomenon and have discerned in it a *new spirit of capitalism*. The trick consists in situating libertarian assertions and the critique of alienation under the *ad hoc* category of “artistic critique” and in presenting this as something that is quite different from a pure “social critique” that refers exclusively to exploitation and hierarchy, which authorizes the accusation of the “artistic critique” for “playing the game of a particularly destructive liberalism”. It should not be surprising that Jean-Claude Michéa has proclaimed as “definitive” the “analysis” of that pair of pedants (Boltanski-Chiapello), but curiously he was not the only one, for there were some from whom we could have expected more lucidity regarding such a claim to re-found social critique *ex cathedra*.

XXVIII

If we have engaged in this quick summary of the falsifications of the French May—deliberately attending to just this one aspect—it is not because we feel absolutely compelled to do so by some “duty to memorialize” dictated by the ten-year commemorative celebrations. What, in our view, justifies these retrospective observations is the recent appearance, after so many years of slanders or slanderous eulogies, of a new wave of commentators who claim to defend ’68 even in its most anti-bureaucratic aspects, and who continue to slander it, since according to them we must interpret (in the style of the book by Kristin Ross quoted above, which was published in France by *Le Monde diplomatique*)¹ the “social movement” of December 1995, Seattle and other rejections of “the liberal new world order” as a continuation, an “afterlife”, of “May”. We would only like to point out that, contrary to one of the most admirable features of the occupations movement (its matter-of-fact rejection of the State, of legality and of any “social dialogue”), the “anti-liberal” protests do nothing but deplore the disappearance of the “social State” and its “culture of public service”, stooping so low as to demand its restoration. Nor is it irrelevant to point out that the post-’68 era has witnessed—in addition to a “festivism” that, now that the storm has put out the fires of the party, no longer requires a great deal of boldness to attack—a diversified supply of segmented egalitarian protests, all of which are unified by their reformist conformism which, when not engaging in apologetics for, avoids any criticism, even of a purely verbal nature, of the central realities of technological and commercial alienation. This is of course true of the statist metastases called associative movements. But it is well known that protests like neo-feminism or the homosexual movements that at least fought against the persistence of particularly repugnant ancient alienations, have been able to embody, by means of *French theory*, a very effective vanguard of normalization and social conformism in which it is hard to discern, with regard to everything from equal rights to gay marriage, just which prescriptions belong to the domain of the *politically correct* and which to that *unitary thought* whose expression until not so long ago aroused such passions. In the mouths of its volatile anti-liberal, another-world-is-possible and anti-growth avatars, the civil society movement formulates and uniformly develops “the social demand for protection from the catastrophe”. Its discouraging example thus contributes a useful complement to the classical critique of bureaucracy. The latter applies to the way the State imposes its rules and its control over society. From now on, it is society itself—by means of *any men whatsoever* who mobilize to combine their various anxieties and to manufacture the image of an alleged “civil society”—which also demands rules and control. It cannot be overemphasized, everything else being equal, how much this muddy land exhibits disturbing similarities with what Primo Levi, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, designated as the *grey zone* of the *Lager*.

¹ Published in the United States by the University of Chicago Press.

XXIX

In his critique of the works in which Burnham first popularized Rizzi's theory of the bureaucratization of the world, Orwell pointed out how the fascination with the spectacle of force had led Burnham, before he ended up following the crowd and joining the anticommunist propaganda of the Cold War, to overestimate the efficiency of the organization that he called "managerial", although at the risk of attributing this same irresistible efficiency to Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia due to the circumstances of the time. Orwell noted that this way of predicting the linear continuation of what was then taking place and speaking of "processes which have barely started are talked about as though they were already at an end", without sufficiently accounting for the slowness of the whole historical process and what we would today call "sociological inertia", "is bound to lead to mistaken prophecies, because, even when it gauges the direction of events rightly, it will miscalculate their tempo" ("James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution", 1946). In a later text ("Burnham's View of the Contemporary World Struggle", 1947), Orwell once again addressed this tendency "to reduce history and its complex processes to a pure logical schema" and to that kind of "realism" that falsifies the perception of reality, and which in this case leads Burnham to attribute an ineluctable character of necessity and unstoppable efficiency to the bureaucratic concentration of power. An effect similar to that of the "power worship now so prevalent among intellectuals" may be observed in the fascination with regard to the technological system, its rapid growth and its "*Blitzkriegs*" against nature: they are the same monotonous delusions of infallible rationality, of sudden and brutal transformations, of historical destiny that is sometimes terrible but always grandiose.

For its part, social critique, even when it deserved the name, often succumbed to some of these mistakes: it either indulged in irony regarding the blunders and mistakes of the leaders, made fun of the incoherence and ridiculous failures of their projects, gloated over the "internal contradictions" which, inevitably, undermined the existing society; or else, on the contrary, as a result of a desire for lucidity with respect to the progress of alienation and thus wanting to emphasize, against all the revolutionist illusions, the perfection of domination, conceded to the latter an efficiency, and sometimes even a rationality, that was capable of allowing it to appear to be indestructible. Obviously, the danger always exists that one could fall prey to exaggeration and simplification when one is describing an ongoing process, in this case one that is leading to the establishment of a "green bureaucracy". But in reality it was almost indispensable to exaggerate in order to make people see precisely in what sense the "new course" of domination cannot be considered a simple face-lift, what the Anglo-Saxons call *greenwashing*. We are not unaware, however, of how far the bureaucratic project of the sustainable management of disaster, from the moment when it goes beyond a call for taking responsibility when brushing our teeth by turning off the tap or for car-pooling when going to the ecological supermarket in order to reduce our carbon footprint, runs into too many obstacles, both external and internal, to effectively achieve any kind of stabilization on a world scale. (After all, according to its own confession, only on that scale can any results be obtained.) The disaster management whose broad outlines we have

attempted to trace will achieve its most striking successes in the countries that are already the most civilized, and most accustomed to over-socialization. And even there it will not, like every bureaucracy, obtain more than a simulation of efficiency. However rapid bureaucratization may develop, precipitated by the states of emergency that it will have to decree, it will “resolve” nothing: it will have to confront, with its enormous means of coercion and falsification, the spread of all kinds of plagues and their unforeseeable combinations. But the intellectual satisfaction of knowing that it is condemned to failure is not much of a consolation for us, especially since this outcome promises what may be a long period during which industrial society will be collapsing *on top of us*. There is thus no place for any computations regarding its possibilities or any speculation regarding what comes “later”. For the time being it is already successfully stifling, and is doing so with an incomparable efficiency, any attempt to sustain a social critique that must be both anti-state and anti-industrial. In this respect we may venture to draw a parallel with the historical situation of the revolutionaries between the two world wars, at a time when one had to be both anti-fascist and anti-stalinist; the use of the fascist threat by the Stalinism of the popular front is similar in many ways to the statist propaganda now being disseminated regarding the risks of ecological collapse: the same concealment of the real historical causes, the same blackmail of urgency and efficiency, the same manipulation of universally acknowledged noble sentiments.

XXX

The obstinate refusers who attempt to cast doubt upon the *benefits*, whatever they may be, which the propaganda for oversocialization insists on imposing against all the evidence, and who refuse to enlist with the Sacred Union for the salvation of the planet, can prepare to be treated in the near future as deserters and saboteurs were in times of war. The “state of necessity” and the shortages that will accumulate will *first of all* force the acceptance or demand for new forms of servitude, in order to preserve what can be preserved of guaranteed survival even if it is only partially successful in this endeavor. (And everyone knows how things stand where no one can boast of such historical conquests.)

The course of this strange war, however, will not fail to create opportunities to engage in the critique in acts of the bureaucratic blackmail. Or, to put it slightly differently: one can predict entropy, but not the rise of something new. The role of the theoretical imagination is still that of discerning, in a present crushed by the probability of the worst-case scenario, the diverse possibilities which nonetheless remain open. Trapped like everyone else within a reality that is as unstable as it is violently destructive, we shall not overlook this datum of experience, which seems to us to be appropriate for resistance: that the action of a few individuals, or of very restricted human groups, can have, with a little luck, effort and will, *incalculable* consequences.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Rene Riesel and Jaime Semprun
Catastrophism, Disaster Management and Sustainable Submission
April 2008

Retrieved on 17th May 2021 from libcom.org
Translated from the Spanish edition: René Riesel and Jaime Semprun, *Catastrofismo, administración del desastre y sumisión sostenible*, Pepitas de Calabaza, La Rioja, Spain, 2011, 131
p.

theanarchistlibrary.org