

A Sick Planet

Guy Debord

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'POLLUTION' IS IN FASHION TODAY, exactly in the same way as revolution: it dominates the whole life of society, and it is represented in illusory form in the spectacle. It is the subject of mind-numbing chatter in a plethora of erroneous and mystifying writing and speech, yet it really does have everyone by the throat. It is on display everywhere as ideology, yet it is continually gaining ground as a material development. Two antagonistic tendencies, progression towards the highest form of commodity production and the project of its total negation, equally rich in contradictions within themselves, grow ever stronger in parallel with one other. Here are the two sides whereby a sole historical moment, long awaited and often described in advance in partial and inadequate terms, is made manifest: the moment when it becomes impossible for capitalism to carry on working.

A time that possesses all the technical means necessary for the complete transformation of the conditions of life on earth is also a time—thanks to that same separate technical and scientific development—with the ability to ascertain and predict, with mathematical certainty, just where (and by what date) the automatic growth of the alienated productive forces of class society is taking us: to measure, in other words, the rapid degradation of the very conditions of survival, in both the most general and the most trivial senses of that term.

Backward-looking gas-bags continue to waffle about (against) the aesthetic criticism of all this, fancying themselves clear-eyed and modem and in tune with their times when they argue that motorways, or the public housing of a place like Sarcelles, have their own beauty—a beauty preferable after all to the discomforts of 'picturesque' old neighbourhoods. These 'realists' solemnly observe that the population as a whole, pace those nostalgic for 'real' cooking, now eat far better than formerly. What they fail to grasp is that the problem of the degeneration of the totality of the natural and human environment has already ceased to present itself in terms of a loss of quality, be it aesthetic or of any other kind; the problem has now become the more fundamental one of whether a world that pursues such a course can preserve its material existence. In point of fact, the impossibility of its doing so is perfectly demonstrated by the entirety of detached scientific knowledge, which no longer debates anything in this connexion except for the length of time still left and the palliative measures that might conceivably, if vigorously applied, stave off disaster for a moment or two. This science can do no more than walk hand in hand with the world that has produced it—and that holds it fast—down the path of destruction; yet

it is obliged to do so with eyes open. It thus epitomizes—almost to the point of caricature—the uselessness of knowledge in its unapplied form.

Admirably accurate measurements and projections are continually being made concerning the rapid increase in the chemical pollution of the breathable atmosphere, as of rivers, streams and, already, oceans; the irreversible accumulation of radioactive waste attending the development of nuclear power for so-called peaceful purposes; the effects of noise; the pervasion of space by plastic junk that threatens to turn it into an everlasting refuse dump; birth rates wildly out of control; the demented vitiation of foodstuffs; the urban sprawl everywhere overrunning what was once town and countryside; and, likewise, the spread of mental illness—including the neurotic fears and hallucinations that are bound to proliferate in response to pollution itself, the alarming features of which are placarded everywhere—and of suicide, whose rate of increase precisely parallels the accelerating construction of this environment (not to mention the effects of nuclear or bacteriological warfare, the wherewithal for which is already to hand, hanging over us like the sword of Damocles, even though it is, of course, avoidable).

In short, if the scope and even the reality of the ‘terrors of the year 1000’ are still a subject of controversy among historians, terror of the year 2000 is as patent as it is well founded; indeed, it is now based on scientific certainty. At the same time, what is happening is by no means fundamentally new: rather, it is simply the ineluctable outcome of a longstanding process. A society that is ever more sick, but ever more powerful, has recreated the world—everywhere and in concrete form—as the environment and backdrop of its sickness: it has created a sick planet. A society that has not yet achieved homogeneity, and that is not yet self-determined, but instead ever more determined by a part of itself positioned above itself, external to itself, has set in train a process of domination of Nature that has not yet established domination over itself. Capitalism has at last demonstrated, by virtue of its own dynamics, that it can no longer develop the forces of production—and this, not in a quantitative sense, as many have taken it, but rather in a qualitative one.

For bourgeois thought, however, speaking methodologically, only the quantitative is valid, measurable and efficient, whereas the qualitative is no more than vague subjective or artistic decoration of the really true, which is gauged solely by its actual *avoir-dupois*. For dialectical thought, by contrast, and hence for history and for the proletariat, the qualitative is the most decisive dimension of real progress. That is what capitalism, on the one hand, and we, on the other, will eventually have demonstrated.

The masters of society are now obliged to speak of pollution, both in order to combat it (for after all they live on the same planet as we do—which is the only sense in which it may be said that the development of capitalism has in effect brought about a measure of class fusion) and in order to conceal it, for the plain fact that such harmful and dangerous trends exist constitutes an immense motive for revolt, a material requirement of the exploited just as vital as the struggle of nineteenth-century proletarians for the right to eat. Following the fundamental failure of the reformisms of the past—all of which without exception aspired to the definitive solution of the problem of class—a new kind of reformism is heaving into view which answers to the same needs as the earlier varieties, namely the oiling of the machine and the opening up of new profitable areas to cutting-edge enterprises. The most modern sector of industry is racing to get involved with the various palliatives to pollution, seeing these as so many new opportunities made all the more attractive by the fact that a good part of the capital monopolized by the state is available for investment and manipulation in this sphere. While this new reformism is guaranteed to fail

for exactly the same reasons as its predecessors, it differs radically from them in that it has run out of time.

The growth of production has until now entirely confirmed its nature as the realization of political economy: as the growth of poverty, which has invaded and laid waste the very fabric of life. A society where the producers kill themselves working, and can do nothing but contemplate the product of their labour, now allows them in all transparency to see—and breathe—the general result of alienated labour, which has proven equally lethal. This society is ruled by an overdeveloped economy which turns everything—even spring water and city air—into economic goods, which is to say that everything has become economic ill—that ‘complete denial of man’ which has now reached its perfect material conclusion. The conflict in capitalism between modern productive forces and the relations of production, whether bourgeois or bureaucratic, has entered its final stage. The rate of production of non-life has risen continually on its linear and cumulative course; a final threshold having just been passed in this progression, what is now produced, directly, is death.

Throughout a world where employers wield all the power thanks to the institution of labour as a commodity, the ultimate, acknowledged and essential function of the developed economy of today is the production of employment. A far cry indeed from the ‘progressive’ nineteenth-century expectation that science and technology would reduce human labour by increasing productivity, and thus more easily satisfy the needs heretofore deemed real by all, without any fundamental change in the quality of the goods made available to that end. It is for the sake of ‘creating jobs’ (even in country areas now devoid of peasants), that is to say for the sake of using human labour as alienated labour, as wage-labour, that everything else is done; and hence that, stupidly, the very foundations of the life of the species—at present even more fragile than the thinking of a Kennedy or a Brezhnev—are put at risk.

The old ocean itself cares naught for pollution, but history is by no means indifferent to it. History can be saved only by the abolition of labour as a commodity. And historical consciousness has never been in such great and urgent need of mastering its world, for the enemy at its gates is no longer illusion but its own death.

When the pitiful masters of a society whose wretched destiny is now discernible—a fate far worse, be it said, than those evoked in the fulminations of even the most radical Utopians of an earlier time—are obliged to admit that our environment has become a social issue, and that the management of everything has become directly political, right down to the herb of the fields and the possibility of drinking water, sleeping without pills or washing without developing sores—in such circumstances, it is obvious that the old specialized politics must perforce declare itself utterly bankrupt.

Bankrupt, indeed, in the supreme expression of its voluntarism, namely the totalitarian bureaucratic power of the so-called socialist regimes, where the bureaucrats in power have proved incapable of managing even the previous stage of the capitalist economy. If these regimes pollute much less (the United States alone produces 50 per cent of worldwide pollution), it is simply because they are much poorer. A country such as China, if it is to retain respect as a power among impoverished nations, has no choice but to sacrifice a disproportionate part of its slim budget to the generation of a decent quantity of pollution, as for example, to the (re)discovery or touching-up of the technology of thermonuclear war (or, more precisely, of the terrifying spectacle of thermonuclear war). Such a high quotient of poverty, both material and mental, buttressed by so much terror, amounts to a death warrant for the bureaucracies presently in power. What dooms

the most modern forms of bourgeois power, by contrast, is a surfeit of wealth that is in effect poisoned. The supposedly democratic management of capitalism, in any country, offers nothing except the electoral victories and defeats that—as has always been obvious—have never changed anything in general and precious little in particular with respect to a class society which imagines that it can last forever. Nor do elections change anything more on those occasions when the system of management itself enters a crisis and affects to desire some vague kind of guidance in the resolution of secondary but urgent problems from an alienated and stupefied electorate (as in the United States, Italy, Great Britain or France). All the experts have long noted—without bothering to explain the fact—that voters almost never change their ‘opinions’, the reason being that voters are people who for a brief instant assume an abstract role that is designed, precisely, to prevent them from existing in their own right and, hence, from changing. (This mechanism has been analysed countless times by demystified political science and by revolutionary psychoanalysis alike.) Nor are voters more likely to change because the world around them is changing ever more precipitately: qua voters, they would not change even if the world was coming to an end. Every representative system is essentially conservative, whereas the conditions of a capitalist society have never been susceptible of conservation. They are continually, and ever more rapidly, undergoing modification, but decisions in this regard—which always ultimately favour giving the market economy its head—are left entirely to politicians who are no more than publicists, whether they run uncontested or against others who are going to do just the same thing—and say so loudly. And yet the person who has just voted ‘freely’ for the Gaullists or for the French Communist Party, just like someone who has been forced to vote for a Gomulka, is quite capable of showing who they really are a week later by taking part in a wildcat strike or an insurrection.

In its state-run and regulated form, the ‘fight against pollution’ is bound, at first, to mean no more than new specializations, ministries, jobs for the boys and promotions within the bureaucracy. The fight’s effectiveness will be perfectly consonant with that approach. It will never amount to a real will for change until the present system of production is transformed root and branch. It will never be vigorously carried on until all pertinent decisions, made democratically and in full knowledge of the issues by the producers, are permanently monitored and executed by those producers themselves (oil tankers will inevitably spill their cargo into the ocean, for example, until they are brought under the authority of authentic sailors’ soviets). Before the producers can rule and act on such questions, however, they must become adults: they must, all of them, seize power.

Nineteenth-century scientific optimism foundered over three main issues. The first was the claim that the advent of revolution was certain, and that it would ensure the happy resolution of existing conflicts; this was the left-Hegelian and Marxist illusion, the least acutely felt among the bourgeois intelligentsia, but the richest, and ultimately the least illusory. The second issue was a view of the universe, or even simply of matter, as harmonious. And the third was a euphorically linear conception of the development of the forces of production. Once we come to terms with the first issue we shall deal by extension with the third, thus enabling us, albeit much later, to address the second, to make it into that which is at stake for us. It is not the symptoms but the illness itself that must be cured. Today, fear is everywhere and we shall escape it only through our own strength, our own ability to destroy every existing kind of alienation and every image of the power that has been wrested from us: only by submitting everything except ourselves—to the sole power of workers’ councils, possessing and continually reconstructing the totality of the world—by submitting everything, in other words, to an authentic rationality, a new legitimacy.

As for the 'natural' and the man-made environment, as for birth rates, biology, production, 'madness' and so on, the choice will not be between festival and unhappiness but, rather, consciously and at every turn in the road, between a myriad of possibilities on the one hand, happy or disastrous but relatively reversible, and nothingness on the other. The terrible choices of the near future, by contrast, amount to but one alternative: total democracy or total bureaucracy. Those with misgivings about total democracy should try to test its possibility for themselves by giving it a chance to prove itself in action; otherwise, they might as well pick themselves a tombstone, for, as Joseph Dejacque put it, 'We have seen Authority at work, and its work condemns it utterly.'

The slogan 'Revolution or Death!' is no longer the lyrical expression of consciousness in revolt: rather, it is the last word of the scientific thought of our century. It applies to the perils facing the species as to the inability of individuals to belong. In a society where it is well known that the suicide rate is on the increase, the experts had to admit, reluctantly, that during May 1968 in France it fell to almost nil. That spring also vouchsafed us a clear sky, and it did so effortlessly, because few cars were burnt and the shortage of petrol prevented the others from polluting the air. When it rains, when there are clouds of smog over Paris, let us never forget that it is the government's fault. Alienated industrial production makes the rain. Revolution makes the sunshine.

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