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Review: Science & Capital – Radical Essays on Science & Technology

Anonymous

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The Dublin based Livewire Publications has produced a new collection of radical essays titled *Science & Capital – Radical Essays on Science & Technology*, with the intention to;

“bring together some of the more radical essays on science and technology written over the years — so as to highlight some of the dangers inherent in the blind trust we are often encouraged to place in science and scientific experts”.

As well as a new introduction, the book contains five essays; including “*And Yet It Moves*” by Boy Igor, a situationist-influenced critique of science from 1986. Also included are extracts from a Paul Feyerabend talk on “*How to Defend Society against Science*”.

The lengthy introduction by Phil Meyler, (aka Phil Mailer of “*Portugal, the Impossible Revolution?*”) has a critique of some of the perils of modern science, since its substitution of religion, and our often uncritical acceptance of “scientific experts”. It analyses the *Sokal affair*, a critique of post modernist ideas on science, as well as “junk science”, the internet and the spectacle of modern commodity technology.

Semprun’s essay on Chernobyl deals with the media manipulation of public perceptions, using the mystification of scientific authority;

“The Ukrainian disaster was followed by a veritable bacchanal of unreason wherein not a sober voice was to be heard. For more than a month, as the winds from Chernobyl continued to blow, power’s experts, who in France regretted having upset us at first by saying nothing, now undertook to reassure us by saying anything at all. Flanked by their communications people, they put on a show that defied parody... Indoctrination of this kind, so poorly disguised as information, always bears the clear marks of its origin. Uncontrollable statistics and unverifiable figures are solemnly trotted out, for all the world as though the whole of society consisted of docile civil servants;

and incomprehensible acronyms — designating obscure but presumably powerful institutions — are pompously produced one after the other, like the litanies of a self-satisfied cleric who can be sure of awed respect from his audience.”

Boy Igor’s “*And Yet It Moves*” is also situationist-influenced in its assessment of science as a spectacle of specialist hierarchical knowledge. It has a good history of science and makes many strong arguments against the scientific concepts of “scientific revolutions” *a la* Popper, Kuhn and Lakatos as well as a critique of Lysenko — the Soviet geneticist who was Stalin’s favourite scientist — and the scientific ideals of Marxist Leninism.

Video Surveillance, CCTV cameras and ever-expanding Big Brother surveillance are attacked and analysed in an essay by the French ‘*Collective*’ group.

The recurring theme running through the essays is to critique claims for the supposed impartiality of science. Rather, these essays investigate science’s role as an ‘objective’ authority in the service of class society. Science as an elitist technological innovator of commodity production and consumption is contrasted with the possibilities for a liberated scientific activity within new forms of social organisation. In the last (and oldest) essay, Bakunin’s prescient and penetrating observations on the tensions between the authoritarian and potential libertarian uses of science still resonate from the 19th century to the present and are echoed through the other essays in this book;

“Science, as a moral entity existing outside of the universal social life and represented by a corporation of licensed savants, should be liquidated and widely diffused among the masses. Called upon to represent henceforth the collective consciousness of society, science must in a real sense become everybody’s property. In this way,

without losing thereby anything of its universal character, of which it can never divest itself without ceasing to be science, and while continuing to concern itself with general causes, general conditions, and general relations of things and individuals, it will merge in fact with immediate and real life of all individuals.”

This is a stimulating book that questions many dominant assumptions about the function of science and technology in capitalism.