

A Sick Planet

By Guy Debord¹

Today “pollution” is in fashion, exactly in the same manner that revolution is: it takes hold of the entire life of society, and it is represented in illusory form in the spectacle. It is the subject of boring chatter in a plethora of erroneous and mystifying writings and speeches, and yet in reality it has everyone by the throat. It is displayed as ideology and it gains ground as material development. These two antagonistic movements – the supreme stage of commodity production and the project of its total negation, equally rich in internal contradictions – grow stronger together. They are the two sides through which a single historical moment (long-awaited and often foreseen in inadequate terms) manifests itself: the impossibility of capitalism continuing to function.

An epoch that has all the technical means to absolutely alter the conditions of life on the entire Earth is also an epoch that, due to the same separate technical and scientific development, has at its disposal all the means of inspection and irrefutable mathematical prediction it needs to exactly measure in advance where – and when – the automatic increase in the alienated productive forces of class-society will lead: that is to say, so as to measure the rapid degradation of the very conditions for survival in the most general and trivial senses of the term.

While imbecilic reactionaries still hold forth on and against an *aesthetic* critique of all this, and believe themselves to be lucid and modern in tune with the times when they proclaim that the super-highway and Sarcelles have their own beauty, which one must prefer to the discomfort of the “picturesque” old neighborhoods, or by gravely remarking that the entirety of the population eats better, despite those nostalgic for good food, while all this is going on, the problem of the degradation of the totality of the natural and human environment ceases to be posed on the plane of what used to pass for “quality,” whether aesthetic or otherwise, and becomes the radical problem of the *material possibility for existence* of a world that pursues such a direction. The impossibility of continuing to do so is in fact already perfectly demonstrated by all detached scientific knowledge, which now only discusses the expiration date and the palliatives that, if one applies them diligently, might slightly postpone it. Such science can only accompany on the road to destruction the world that has produced it and *has it in its grasp*, but is forced to do so with open eyes. It thus shows, to a caricatural degree, the uselessness of knowledge that is not put to use.

One measures and extrapolates with excellent precision the rapid increase of chemical pollution in the air; in the water of rivers, lakes and even oceans; and the irreversible increase of radioactivity accumulated by the *peaceful* development of nuclear energy; the effects of noise; the invasion of space by plastics that can claim an eternity of universal landfill-storage; rapid increases in birth-rates; the senseless falsification of food;² the urbanistic leprosy that over-runs what used to be the town and the country; thus mental illnesses – including neurotic fears and

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² Years later, this theme would be taken up by Debord in his essay “Abat-Faim (Hunger Abatement),” published in the *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* (1985).

hallucinations that will not fail to soon arise and multiply on the very theme of pollution, of which alarming images are everywhere – and suicide, whose rate of growth already exactly matches that of the construction of this environment (to say nothing of the effects of atomic or bacteriological warfare, of which the means hang over us like the sword of Damocles, but obviously remain avoidable).

In brief, if the scale and reality of the “Terrors of the Year 1000” are still a subject for controversy among historians, the Terror of the Year 2000 is also quite well-founded; it is henceforth a *scientific* certainty. Nevertheless, what is happening is not fundamentally new: it is simply the *forced conclusion* of a longstanding process. A society that is always sicker, but always more powerful, has concretely re-created the entire world as the environment and decor of its illness, a *sick planet*. A society that still hasn’t become homogenous and that isn’t determined by itself, but is *always more* determined by a part of itself that places itself above the rest and is exterior to it, has set in motion a process that dominates nature but isn’t itself dominated. By its own development, capitalism has finally provided the proof *that it can no longer develop the forces of production*; and that limitation isn’t simply *quantitative*, as many have believed, but *qualitative*, as well.

Meanwhile, for bourgeois thought, methodologically, only the quantitative aspect of things is serious, measurable, effective; and the qualitative aspect is merely the uncertain, subjective or artistic decoration of the real, which is estimated by its true weight. For dialectical thought (and thus for history and the proletariat, as well), on the other hand, the qualitative is the most decisive dimension of real development. Here is what we, capitalism and us, have ended up demonstrating separately.

The masters of society are now obliged to speak of pollution and to combat it (because, after all, they live on the same planet as we do, and this is the only sense in which one can allow that capitalism’s development has actually realized a certain fusion of the classes) so as to dissimulate it: because the simple truth of the “harmful effects” [*nuisances*] and current risks suffice to constitute an immense factor in revolt, a *materialist* demand of the exploited, as vital as the struggle of the proletarians of the 19th Century for the possibility of eating. After the fundamental failure of all the reformisms of the past – which aspired to the definitive solution of the problem of classes – a new reformism has appeared, one that obeys the same necessities as its precedents: to oil the machine and to open up new opportunities for profit for cutting-edge enterprises. The most modern sector of industry is hastening to develop various palliatives for pollution, seeing this is a brand-new market, one that will be all the more profitable because a good part of the capital monopolized by the State has been made available for use and manipulation in it. But if this new reformism is, in advance, guaranteed to fail and for exactly the same reasons as for the failure of past reformisms, it is radically different from them in that *it has run out of time*.

The growth of production has until now entirely verified the fact that it is the realization of *political economy*: the growth of poverty, which has invaded and damaged the very fabric of life. The society in which the workers kill themselves at work and can only contemplate the results, which are given freely for them to see and breathe: the general results of alienated work is *death*. In a society in which the economy is over developed, everything – even spring water and city air – enters the sphere of *economic goods*, that is to say, the sphere of *economic evil*, “the complete denial of man,” which now awaits its perfect *material conclusion*. The conflict of modern productive forces and the bourgeois or bureaucratic relations of production of capitalist society has entered into its final phase. The production of non-life has continually pursued its

linear and cumulative course; over-coming a final threshold in its progress, it now directly produces death.

Today, the ultimate function – avowed and essential – of the [over-]developed economy in a world in which the labor-commodity reigns and assures all power to its patrons is *the production of jobs*. One is thus quite far from the “progressive” ideas of the preceding century concerning the possible diminution of human labor by the scientific and technical multiplication of productivity, which was supposed to more easily assure the satisfaction of needs *previously recognized by all as real*, without any *fundamental alteration* of the quality of the goods that were made available for that purpose. It is at present to “produce jobs,” even in the regions bereft of peasants, that is to say, to use human labor *as alienated labor*, as salariat,³ that *everything else is done*, and thus one stupidly threatens the very basis of the life of the species, which is currently more fragile than the thought of a Kennedy or a Breshnev.

The ancient oceans are indifferent to pollution, but history is not. It can only be saved by the abolition of the labor-commodity. And never has historical consciousness had as much urgent need of dominating its world, because the enemy at its door is no longer an illusion, but its own death.

At a moment when the poor masters of this society – whose wretched fate can now be seen and which is much worse than all of the condemnations that were heaped upon the most radical utopians – must confess that our environment has become a social issue, that the management of *everything* (including the herbs of the field, the possibility of drinking, the possibility of sleeping without having to take too many sleeping pills or washing oneself without suffering from allergies) has become a directly *political* affair, one sees quite well that the old specialized politics must confess that it is completely finished.

It is finished in the supreme form of its voluntarism: the totalitarian, bureaucratic power of the so-called socialist regimes, because the bureaucrats in power have not shown themselves capable of managing even the preceding stage of the capitalist economy. If they pollute much less – the United States alone produces 50% of the world’s pollution – it is because they are much poorer. As in China, for example, where, despite devoting a disproportionate part of its budget to production, they can only afford the pollution-prestige of the poor powers: that is to say, a few re-discoveries and perfections of the techniques of thermonuclear war or, more exactly, its menacing spectacle. So much poverty, both material and mental, supported by so much terrorism, condemns the bureaucracies in power. And what condemns the most modernized bourgeois power is the intolerable result of so much *effectively poisoned* richness. The so-called democratic management of capitalism (whatever the country) only offers elections-resignations that, as one has always seen, do not change anything in the ensemble and change even less in the details of a class society that imagines that it will endure indefinitely. They change nothing, moreover, at the moment that this management itself panics and, to settle certain secondary but more urgent problems, feigns to wish for some vague directives from the alienated and dumbed-down electorate (USA, Italy, England, France). All of the specialized observers have always called attention to the fact – without troubling themselves too much to explain it – that the voter almost never changes his “opinion”: this is exactly because the voter is someone who, for a brief instant, assumes an abstract role that is precisely intended to prevent him from being himself and from changing anything. (This mechanism has been demonstrated a

³ The French here is a neologism that combines “salary” with “proletariat,” to produce a proletariat that receives a salary.

hundred times, as much by demystified political analysis as by the explanations of revolutionary psychoanalysis.) The voter no longer changes when the world changes around him, in always more precipitous ways and, insofar as he is a voter, he won't change even if the world is ending. Every representative system is essentially *conservative*, whereas capitalist society's conditions of existence have never been conserved: they are modified without interruption and always more quickly, but the decision – always at base a decision to leave the process of commercial production alone – is entirely left to the advertising specialists, whether they run uncontested or against others who would do the same thing and, moreover, say so loudly. And yet the man who “freely” votes for the Gaullists or the PCF,⁴ just as much as the man who is constrained and forced to vote for a Gomulka,⁵ is capable of showing what he truly is, next week, by participating in a wildcat strike or an insurrection.⁶

On its Statist and regulatory side, the so-called “fight against pollution” at first creates new specializations, ministerial services, *jobs*⁷ opportunities for bureaucratic advancement. And its efficacy will completely be determined by that approach. It can never become a real will to transform the current production system from the roots up. And it will only be firmly applied at the moment when all decisions – democratically arrived at, in full knowledge of the situation, made by the producers – are monitored and executed *by the producers themselves* (for example, ships will inevitably dump their oil in the sea as long as they are not [operated] under the authority of the real *soviets of the seas*). To decide upon and execute all of this, it is necessary that the producers become adults; it is necessary that they take hold of all power.

The scientific optimism of the 19th century has collapsed in three essential areas. Primarily, the pretense to *guarantee* that the revolution would be the happy resolution of existing conflicts (this was the Left-Hegelian and Marxist illusion, the one that least affected the bourgeois intelligentsia, but the richest and, ultimately, the least illusory one). Secondly, the coherence of the universe and, more simply, of matter. Thirdly, the euphoric and linear conception of the development of the productive forces. If we dominate the first area, we have also resolved the third, and later we will know how to make the second area our affair and our game. It isn't necessary to treat the symptoms but the sickness itself. Today, fear is everywhere; we will only leave it behind by trusting in our own strength, in our own capacity to destroy all existing alienations and all images of the power that has escapes us; by putting everything except ourselves in the hands of the Workers' Councils that at every moment possess and reconstruct the totality of the world, that is to say, true rationality, a new legitimacy.

In matters of the “natural” and constructed environments, birth rates, biology, production, “madness,” etc., there won't be a choice between the festival and unhappiness, but on the one hand – consciously and at every turn – between a thousand fortunate or disastrous possibilities that are relatively correctable and, on the other hand, nothingness. The *terrible* choices of the near future leave only this one: total democracy or total bureaucracy. Those who doubt total democracy must make efforts to prove it to themselves, by *providing it with the opportunity to prove itself in action*, or else they might as well buy their tombstones on the installment plan, because “we have seen Authority at work, and its works condemn it” (Joseph Déjacque).⁸

⁴ The French Communist Party.

⁵ Wladyslaw Gomulka, a Polish Communist.

⁶ In December 1970, a massive anti-Communist insurrection broke out in Poland.

⁷ English in original.

⁸ A French anarcho-communist (1821-1864).

“Revolution or death”:⁹ this slogan is no longer the lyrical expression of consciousness in revolt; it is *the last word of the scientific thought* of our century.

It applies to the perils facing the species as well as to the impossibility of individuals to belong. In this society, in which the rate of suicide is well known to be increasing, the specialists have to admit, with a certain reluctance, that those rates were reduced to almost nothing in France during May 1968. That spring also effortlessly brought forth a beautiful sky, because several cars were burned and all of the others lacked the gasoline [necessary] to pollute. When it rains, when there are false clouds of smog over Paris, never forget the fact that it is the fault of the State. Alienated industrial production causes rain. Revolution makes for beautiful weather.

⁹ “Sometimes, in the current prosperity of capitalist France, one wants to cry out: ‘Beware! Revolution or death. . .’ This does not mean, ‘Let us die for the revolution,’ but rather ‘If you do not want to die, make the revolution, swiftly, totally.’” Henri Lefebvre, introduction to *Space and Politics* (1972).