

# EDITORIAL



A letter recently leaked to *The Observer* (10.10.93) revealed that government scientists are privately extremely concerned about the problem of long-term nuclear waste storage. Behind the facade of tranquility there is, reportedly, a depth of anxiety perhaps only paralleled by the level of hubris and public deception around the matter of nuclear energy. There is in the UK enough high-level radioactive waste to cover a football pitch to the depth of 20 feet, and scientists have not found a safe way to dispose of it, but the nuclear 'industry has always presented a firm public face'.

If this is symptomatic of the practice of institutionalised science, then the post-modern rejection of the grand narratives of science by intellectuals and a wider social constituency becomes all too understandable. Physical science, a grand narrative par excellence, seems to have been hijacked by the nation states and big corporations (see Collier below). That in their hands its reasoning has been atrophied by a bleak calculus of exchange value and commodification, is a theme taken up in the ecological writings in this issue. The consequence of 'corporate science', it has been repeatedly argued, is a failure to gain a (long-term) comprehensive grasp of the aetiological ramifications of technological projects.

As Marshall Berman detailed in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 'short-termism' is an endemic feature of modernity. The urge towards ceaseless development characteristic of the modern world represses theoretical consciousness (cf. O'Neill below) and embodies a very Faustian fear that if individuals and collectives 'stop to rest, they will be swept away'. The diabolical price of the boundless freedom envisaged by Faustus, Berman notes, is an ever increasing environmental chaos and destruction.

Andrew Collier theorises these features of development within the modern world in terms of an ongoing competitive dynamic constitutive of patterns of global accumulation, whether these involve corporate capitalism or such nation states as those of the former 'Eastern Bloc', compelled to emulate capitalism for their own survival. This dynamic fosters a practical rationality which resonates with the paradigm of 'exchange value' in the economic domain. Collier argues that the contrast drawn by Marx between exchange and use value can be extended to ecological matters such that 'use value' provides the key to a critical practical rationality of the environment. This position is elaborated via the insight that Marx deploys the term 'use value' not mere to denote a *judgement* of the worth of something, but also to indicate the value of the thing itself; its objective properties rather than its significance for some mode of utilisation. In this sense, all objects have a *unique* worth. Here Collier follows Aristotle's distinction between the concrete products of household labour and the abstract

art of money making (chrematistics). Chrematistic rationality is seen as the 'principal enemy of the environment' and is identified with the emergence of capitalism. Whilst capitalism is exploitative of human labour it is also, in terms of use values, irrational. For example, its ecological destructiveness is manifest in terms of degradation of things unmediated by exchange value, that is, direct use values, such as air, water, forests, the urban environment etc.

Collier rejects the utilitarian perspective which has us individually consuming objects through pleasurable experience of them. Rather than being externally related to our environment, we are, he argues, part of it. Conversely, we enjoy use values directly because they are a part of us. It is not as individuals that we enjoy these things, but rather as a kind of being-in-the-world. Exchange value corrodes this organic link with the environment.

Exchange-value rationality has a comparable effect on science; instead of investigating the particularity of problems contemporary science tends to view them abstractly, comprehending through ready-made categories. The specific character of a subject under investigation can only be adduced by drawing in the multifaceted web of causation in which it is implicated. Only this concrete approach will tell us the real consequences and costs of any technological policy decision.

Tim Hayward also begins with the theme of commodification and goes on to argue for a retheorisation of Marx's contradiction between forces and relations which takes into account the limiting effect of the environment on sustainable forms of development. Hence Marx's admiration for the emancipatory potential of the productive forces is here tempered by a sense that the continued domination/exploitation of nature has too much in common with the system of commodity production. A notion of natural limits to growth ('conditions of production') is required which is not purely ecological but sees the problem also in terms of the structure of the social division of labour. The idea of natural limits to growth is delineated by Hayward in terms of ecological balance 'which regulate(s) the metabolism' between the social and the natural 'from the side of nature', something which is absent from the Marxian paradigm. This shifts the emancipatory emphasis away from its traditional identification with ongoing development towards a focus on the intensification of social contradictions produced by development and their political denouement.

Further, Hayward's stance is a 'political ecology' in that it suggests that, whilst the Enlightenment thinkers recognised natural limits only in terms of *isolated* laws of nature, the complex interactions and equilibria produced by these laws in the social sphere are equally a limit on development.

Hayward spells out some consequences of his thesis on

limits or 'conditions of production' in terms of rethinking 'productive' and 'reproductive' activities and the boundaries between them. Importantly, child-producing and nurturing activities can be seen as a condition of production. This blurs the division between productive, and biological and other socially reproductive activities and facilitates a new way of looking at the class position of childbearing women.

John O'Neill takes up the themes of the value and autonomy of nature in order to make an ecological argument via a critique of humanist Marxism. He suggests that, although dominant reading of Marx's early writings is anthropocentric, it is nevertheless possible to read them biocentrically. Some aspects of Marx's early work are, however, irretrievable. For example, the themes of objectification and self-realisation in the alienation paradigms of Hegel and the young Marx are evocative of a narcissistic relationship with nature where the non-human is rendered as an embodiment of human powers via human labour. However, it is clear that Marx's productivism is interwoven with a view of cognition which suggests a different relation to nature. The theoretical consciousness employed in science and the arts demands that we value things for their own attributes as well as for human projects. Indeed, production itself depends upon recognition of the independent values or natures of things. This entails both grasping the separateness and indifference of nature to human concerns, and seeing this condition of nature as one of *value*. O'Neill embodies this thought in the observation that, whilst the usual view of making is that something is transformed in accordance with a plan/model, the view that the plan is guided by the natural constitution of the object is no less true. In this way, an ecological political theory can be founded which takes on board the Marxist critique of capitalist development and the ecological concern for the intrinsic value of the non-human realm.

Sue Clegg's article on child sexual abuse takes up some of Collier's realistic preoccupations. Describing the notion of child abuse as an historically shifting congerie of determinants, she emphasises the complexity of the phenomenon. Whilst she finds much of use in Hacking's suggestion that child abuse is socially constructed, she also wishes to avoid the conclusion that 'child abuse' is merely the product of a discursive strategy. Explanations using one key category such as patriarchy or sexuality are criticised for their reductionism. Clegg argues that a realist retheorisation of 'child sexual abuse' can only be accomplished by starting from the perception that the category has been used in a normalising way. She suggests that it might be fruitful to look, for example, at the way marginal groups are forced into practices such as child prostitution, rather than 'moralising' child abuse as the wickedness of individuals.

In the Commentary Alan Sinfield looks at the way welfare capitalism has problematised homosexuality and argues for a politics of subcultural resistance.

Finally, this issue contains obituaries of E. P. Thompson and Madan Sarup.

**Howard Feather**

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