

Fredy Perlman

**Progress and Nuclear
Power: The Destruction of
the Continent and Its Peoples**

1979

The premeditated poisoning of human beings, of soils and of other living species can only by the grossest hypocrisy be considered an “accident”. Only the wilfully blind can claim that this consequence of Technical Progress was “unforeseen”.

The poisoning and removal of this continent’s living inhabitants for the sake of “higher entities” may have begun in Eastern Pennsylvania, but not during the past few weeks.

Eleven score years ago, in the region currently being poisoned by radiation from Three Mile Island, speculators with names like Franklin, Morris, Washington and Hale hid their names behind facades such as the Vandalia Company and the Ohio Company. These companies had one purpose: to sell land for a profit. The individuals behind the companies had one aim: to remove all obstacles which stood in the way of the free deployment of profit-making, whether the obstacles were human beings or millennial cultures or forests or animals or even streams and mountains. Their aim was to civilise this continent, to introduce to it a cycle of activities never before practised here: Working, Saving, Investing, Selling — the cycle of reproducing and enlarging Capital.

The main obstacle to this activity consisted of human beings who had lived on this continent for millennia and who, without Law or Government or Church, enjoyed the sun, the streams, the woodlands, the varied species of plant and animal, and each other. These people considered life an end, not a means to be put at the service of “higher” ends. They did not flock to Civilisation like children to a cookie jar, as the Franklins and Washingtons expected them to do. On the contrary. They wanted very little of what Civilisation had to give. They wanted some of the weapons, and they wanted these only to preserve their freedom against further encroachments of Civilisation; they preferred death to a life reduced to Working, Saving, Investing and Selling. In a final desperate attempt to drive Civilisation and its Benefits to the sea and across it, in an uprising currently remembered as the name of an automobile, their warriors ousted land grabbers and their soldiers from Ontario, Michigan, Ohio and western Pennsylvania. For this uncompromising resistance they earned from the Civilised the title of Savages. This title gave the Civilisers a licence to exterminate without qualm or scruple: “Send them pox-infested blankets,” ordered one of the commanders in charge of the extermination.

The recently celebrated Bicentennial of American Independence commemorated the day when, ten score years ago, land grabbers, speculators and their allies determined to accelerate the extermination of independence from the region west of Three Mile Island. The King’s government was too distant to protect investments adequately, and in any case it was Feudal and didn’t always share the speculators’ aims; it even went so far as to enforce the boundaries established by treaties with the Savages. What was needed was an efficient apparatus under the direct control of the land grabbers and devoted exclusively to the prosperity

of their enterprises. Informal frontier police organisations like the Paxton Boys were efficient for the massacre of the tribal inhabitants of an isolated village like Conestoga. But such frontier formations were small and temporary, and they were as dependent on the active consent of each participant as the tribal warriors themselves; therefore they were not proper police organisations at all. The speculators allied themselves with idealists and dreamers, and behind a banner on which was inscribed Freedom, Independence and Happiness, took the power of government, military and police into their own hands.

One and a half centuries ago, the efficient apparatus for the progress of Capital was in high gear. Military and police organisations based on obedience and submission, and not on anyone's active consent, were ready to go into action against people who had resisted that type of regimentation for twenty thousand years if not longer. Congress passed one of its most explicit bits of legislation: The Indian Removal Act. Within a few years, all resistance, all activity which was not the activity of Capital, was removed from the area stretching westward from Three Mile Island to the Mississippi, southward from Michigan to Georgia. The Government, quickly becoming one of the most powerful in the world, was no longer restricted to poisoning with pox or to the surprise massacre of villagers; it implemented the Removal with a judicious combination of Platitudes, Promises and Police. The remaining free tribes people could not resist this combination without adopting it, but they could not adopt it without ceasing to be free. They chose to remain free, and the last free human beings between Three Mile Island and the Mississippi were Removed.

As settlers moved into the deliberately vacated lands where the very air they breathed gave them a taste of the recently eliminated freedom, they transformed vast woodlands into enlarged replicas of the hell they had left behind. The enjoyment of trails and forests ceased: the forests were burned; the trails became obstacle courses to be traversed as rapidly as Capital made possible. Joy ceased to be life's aim; life itself became mere means; its end was profit. The variety of hundreds of cultural forms was reduced to the uniformity of a unique routine: work, save, invest, sell, everyday from sunrise to sunset, and count money after sundown. Every previous activity, and scores of new ones, were transformed from sources of joy to sources of profit. Corn, beans and squash, the "three sisters" respected and loved by the region's previous inhabitants, became mere commodities for sale at food markets; their sowers and harvesters no longer grew them to enjoy at meals, feasts and festivals, but to sell for profit. Leisurely gardening was replaced by the hard work of farming, trails gave way to rails, walking was superseded by the locomotion of gigantic coal burning furnaces on wheels, canoes were swept aside by floating cities which stopped for no obstacle as they filled the air with burning embers and black smoke. The "three sisters," along with the

rest of their family, were degraded to mere merchandise, as were the trees that became lumber, the animals that became meat, and even the journeys, the songs, the myths and tales of the continent's new inhabitants.

And new inhabitants there were: at first hundreds, then thousands, finally millions. When the importation of outright slaves finally ended, surplus peasants were imported from the run down estates of post-feudal Europe. Their ancestors hadn't known freedom for so many generations that the very memory of it had been lost. Formerly liveried domestics or farmhands on the estates of increasingly commercial lords, the newcomers arrived already trained to want precisely what Capital had to offer, and the degradation of life imposed by Capital was freedom to them when compared to their only frame of reference. Sold plots by land investors, transported to the plots by railway investors, equipped by farm implement investors, financed by bank investors, furnished and clothed by the same interests, often by the very same Houses who had provided them with everything else at a rate of profit no previous age would have regarded as "just," they boastfully wrote their relatives in the old country that they had become their own lords, that they were free farmers but in the pits of their stomachs and in the missed beat of their hearts they felt the truth: they were slaves of a master who was even more intractable, inhuman and removed than their former lords, a master whose lethal power, like radioactivity's, could be felt but not seen. They had become the liveried domestics of Capital. (As for those who ended up as "operatives" or "unskilled hands" in the factories that produced the implements and the rails: they had little to boast of in their letters; they had breathed freer air wherever they had started from.)

A century after the uprising associated with the name of Pontiac, a century filled with desperate resistance by Pontiac's successors against the further encroachments of Capital, some of the imported farmers began to fight against their reduction to servants of railroad, equipment and finance Capital. The populist farmers burned to arrest and lock up the Rockefellers, Morgans and Goulds directly responsible for their degradation, but their revolt was only a faint echo of the earlier revolt of Ottowas, Chippewas, Delawares and Potawatomes. The farmers turned against the personalities but continued to share the culture responsible for their degradation. Consequently they failed to unite with, or even recognise as their own, the armed resistance of the plains people, the last to keep the entire continent from being turned into an island of Capital -a struggle defeated by ancient Assyrian (and modern Soviet Socialist) methods of mass deportation, concentration camps, massacres of unarmed prisoners, and unabated brainwashing by military and missionary goons.

Militant and courageous though many of them were, the struggling farmers rarely placed enjoyment and life above work, savings and profit, and their movement was derailed altogether when radical politicians infiltrated it and equated the desire for a new life with the desire for a new Leader. The form of derailment of the Populist movement became the form of existence of the labour movement during the century that followed. The politicians who dug the grave of populism were the forerunners of the infinite assortment of monkish sects, modelled organisationally on the Jesuit Order but deriving doctrine and dogma from one or another communist, socialist or anarchist Book. Ready to leap at an instant's notice into any situation where people began to struggle to regain their own humanity, they squelched one after another potential rebellion by dumping their doctrine, their organisation and their leadership on top of people struggling for life. These clowns, for whom all that was missing was their mugs and speeches on the front pages of newspapers, finally became capitalists who took to market the unique commodity they had cornered: labour.

Shortly before the turn of the present century, with effective resistance permanently removed, with a pseudo-resistance which was in fact an instrument for the final reduction of human activity to a mere variable of Capital, the efficient apparatus for the generation of profits lost all external obstacles. It still had internal obstacles: the various fractions of Capital, the Vanderbilts, Goulds and Morgans, continually turned their guns against each other and threatened to topple the whole structure from within. Rockefeller and Morgan pioneered the merger, the combination of the various fractions: monied investors distributed their monies throughout each other's enterprises; directors sat on each other's boards; and each and all acquired an interest in the unrestricted march of every unit of the entire apparatus. With the exception of rare surviving personal and family empires, the enterprises were directed by mere hirelings who differed from the rest of the hands mainly by the size of their emoluments. The task of the directors was to ride over all obstacles, human and natural, with only one limitation: the efficient operation of the other enterprises collectively constituting Capital.

Two score years ago, the researches of physical and chemical sciences at the disposal of Capital led to the discovery that the gross substances above and below the soil were not the only substances exploitable for profits. It appeared that the "liberated" nuclei of certain substances were eminently exploitable by Capital. The destruction of matter at the atomic level, first used as the most hideous weapon hitherto wrought by human beings, became the newest commodity. By this time the interest payments, freight fees and equipment purchases of farmers, as well as the long-vanished trees and forest animals, had ceased to be interesting as sources of significant profits. Energy companies interlocked with uranium and oil monopolies became empires more powerful than any of the states which served

them as trouble-shooters. Within the computers of these empires, the health and lives of an “acceptable” number of farm and city dwellers was balanced against an “acceptable” gain or loss of profits. Potential popular responses to such calculations were controlled by judicious combinations of platitudes, promises and police.

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- The poisoning of people in Eastern Pennsylvania with cancer-inducing radiation by a system that devotes a substantial portion of its activity to “defence” against nuclear assault from abroad;
- The contamination of food which is to be consumed by the continent’s remaining inhabitants, and the destruction of the prospects of farmers who had dutifully devoted their lives to growing the merchandise interesting to Capital at a stage which ended half a century ago;
- The transformation into a literal minefield, using unprecedentedly lethal poisons and explosives, of a continent once peopled by human beings whose aim in life was to enjoy the air, sun, trees, animals and each other;
- The prospect of a continent covered with raging infernos, their loudspeakers reciting their recorded messages to a charred earth: “There is no need to overreact; the situation is stable; the leaders have everything under control”.

All this is no accident. It is the present stage of progress of Technology, alias Capital, called Frankenstein by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, considered “neutral” by aspiring managers burning to get their “revolutionary” hands on the controls. For two hundred years Capital developed by destroying nature, by removing and destroying human beings. Capital has now begun a frontal attack on its own domestics; its computers have begun to calculate the expendability of those who’d been taught to think themselves its beneficiaries. If the spirits of the dead could be reborn among the living. Ottawa and Chippewa and Potawatomi warriors could take up the struggle where they left it two centuries ago, augmented by the forces of Sioux, Dakota and Nez Perce, Yana and Medoc and the countless tribes whose languages are no longer spoken. Such a force could round up criminals who would not otherwise be brought before any tribunal. The numerous agents of Capital could then continue to practice their routine of work-save-invest-sell, torturing each other with platitudes, promises and police, inside defused and disconnected power plants, behind plutonium doors.

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First published in a special anti-nuclear issue of Fifth Estate magazine on April 8, 1979. It was written earlier in that year just after an accident at Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in eastern Pennsylvania. As news of the accident spread, official messages insisted, "There is no need to overreact, the situation is stable, the leaders have everything under control," but eventually people living near the plant had to be evacuated. Here Fredy reminds us how the original inhabitants of this region were duped and destroyed by the platitudes, promises and police that always accompany Capital.
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