

Doom For Whom? The Anthropocene as Opportunity

"Ever since the world ended, I face the future with a smile"-
Mose Allison

Might the next extinct species be our own? We can't say we haven't been warned. For at least seventy years the world's leading scientists have tried to awaken us to the danger of annihilation, and one, furthermore, that is self-inflicted. After the dropping of the atomic bombs in 1945, Linus Pauling and Albert Einstein led the campaign for nuclear disarmament. Shortly thereafter, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* alerted us to the devastation being wrought by pesticides and environmental pollution. In 1988 James Hansen's testimony before Congress announced the threat posed by carbon-emissions and the advent of anthropogenic climate change. In 1995 Richard Leakey published his *Sixth Extinction* providing proof of both the epochal scale and immediate urgency with which we had to act to prevent an otherwise inevitable outcome. These are but a few famous examples of an ongoing, concerted effort to bring unimpeachable evidence to the attention of the public in the hope that, thus enlightened, the public might demand legislative action to alter the course of history. At present, however, this effort has failed to impede our headlong rush to armageddon. The forthcoming decision to, perhaps, rename the current geological epoch, the Anthropocene, is just one more reminder of the howling contradiction between what we know and what we do.

This raises three questions I want to briefly address. The first is a hidden flaw in the arguments made by even the best-intentioned scientists. The second is the historical record, often overlooked or distorted, in part, due to the aforementioned "flaw." Third, I want to examine certain philosophical dimensions, largely absent in both the scientific

and historical accounts but which are nonetheless embodied in specific social movements, such as La Via Campesina; movements, moreover, that put the lie to the feigned helplessness on the part of State representatives and the hopeless resignation of people, mainly in the wealthy countries, which presently dominate debate regarding humanity, the environment and the making of change.

To begin with, scientists present the evidence of "human activity" causing a catastrophe of unprecedented scale. This may be accurate insofar as human labor as an aggregate has indeed transformed the environment from which homo sapiens derives. (and if scientists were more rigorous in their scholarship and scrupulous in accreditation they would acknowledge Karl Marx's identification of the "metabolic rift" as a crisis of precisely such proportions-see John Bellamy Foster's pioneering work on this.) But "human activity" is more often intended and interpreted as an appeal to everyone, regardless of differences, to unite in a common effort. Put this way, however, the appeal suffers from a confusion of the biological with the sociological. Humans are one species (irredeemable racists notwithstanding) sharing the same physical and mental faculties universally. Nevertheless, for the last 10,000 years, humans have been divided sociologically in two principle ways: stratification within groups and war between groups. That is, masters and slaves and war between masters. No doubt, the *idea* of a common destiny has been widely propagated, notably in the internationalism that grew out of the socialist movement of the 19th Century, calling for the global unity of workers, peasants and oppressed peoples, in the hope that the ravages of war, poverty and oppression could be once and forever driven from the Earth. But these aspirations have yet to be realized and appeals made by scientists to a non-existent "humankind" fail, in part, because they obscure the divisions

that must be overcome in order to implement their suggestions. Indeed, one short period within the last seventy years makes clear this distinction.

In the wake of the carnage of WWII, not only did China gain its independence from foreign domination but a wave of decolonization swept the so-called "Third World" unleashing a corresponding revolutionary upsurge within the colonial powers-especially the US, France and Portugal-which is commonly referred to as the revolution of 1968. This revolutionary upsurge gave birth to many things but most significantly as regards our discussion is Environmentalism, Eco-socialism, Indigenous Peoples' struggles and widespread changes in popular consciousness that have been sustained, against all the power arrayed against them, by dedicated activism. What followed, of course, was the defeat of the revolution, the triumph of neoliberal capitalism and the rampaging expansion of plunder and pollution that have characterized the last half-century. But to call this "human activity", to suggest that "we," each of us humans, are to blame through our selfishness and greed, is to commit an error so grievous-and yet so obvious-that it begs another far more profound, question: is the Anthropocene in fact an opportunity for an *alliance* with nature, a unity between the "Wretched of the Earth" and the Earth itself, to rid the world of the disease of capitalism? To put it another way, are the forces nature is undoubtedly unleashing, ones we can *use* to mobilize ourselves for a change out of the Anthropocene and into a new epoch barely imaginable today?

This leads to the second point, regarding history. The debate surrounding the naming of our current epoch the Anthropocene is concerned not only with the evidence of anthropogenic effects shaping the geology of the Earth (which is overwhelming) but *when* that evidence first appeared, i.e., when to date the beginning of this epoch. Briefly scanned,

there are three main dates being suggested: A. 8-10,000 years ago when agriculture developed sufficiently for civilization to begin, B. the Industrial Revolution of approximately 200 years ago and C. 1945-the dropping of the atomic bomb, followed by the vast expansion of mineral extraction, soil depletion, deforestation and waste dumping that distinguish this period from all preceding it. One need not be a historian to recall that all three examples are marked not by technological development alone, but by the intensification of the aforementioned social stratification and war. If we use Sumer as an early reference point, then the Epic of Gilgamesh makes abundantly clear that an aristocracy and priesthood lorded it over a mass of laborers (peasants, artisans and slaves) while contending with neighboring groups for dominance in the region. If we look at the industrial revolution in England, we see the brutal removal of peasants from the land, the enslavement of men, women and children in the textile mills and coal-pits to be resolutely fought by generations of revolutionaries, giving birth to socialism as a movement, and dreams of heaven on earth, namely communism. One need not be a historian to know this. Just read William Blake. Or William Morris. Indeed, Romanticism as an artistic movement, is rooted in this historic struggle, recalling a partly mythical but also partly living past in its condemnation of capitalism's "dark, satanic mills." What transpired in the wake of WWII, doesn't need to be repeated but let's not forget that, defeat notwithstanding, almost every issue with which we are concerned today is, to a large extent, the unfinished business of the revolution of the Sixties.

The philosophical dimensions are far from arcane, academic pondering, first, because philosophy's principle concern is human consciousness and it is transforming human consciousness that is simultaneously our best hope and most maligned component of the present situation. Second, because

philosophy upholds the potency and potential of ideas, e.g., the Good, the Beautiful and the True-as opposed to the pragmatic, the realpolitik, the *opinion* that justifies Might Makes Right. I would be the first to admit that the situation is hopeless and we might as well accept our fate-as most political leaders in the world seem content to believe-were it not for the fact that philosophy has, at least since Pythagoras, waged an unending struggle against just these opinions and beliefs. According to such opinion "Human Nature" is a static and unchanging "given" which, furthermore, is confirmed by capitalism's success in exploiting it for its own ends. Yet what is "unthinkable" to the capitalist is precisely what we must think. This necessitates the overturning of the cult of the individual: the acquisitive, fear-driven, animal that thinks only to preserve itself. This false image-born historically with the rise of the bourgeoisie, its institutionalization in law accomplished only in the last four hundred years-must be replaced by its diametrical opposite. In other words, "We", not "I", is the basic unit by which society must measure success or failure. The greater good must be established as the guiding principle by which we judge our efforts and it must be demonstrated against all opposition to be superior as a means not only of organizing social production and distribution but of ensuring the greatest happiness and fulfillment of all. Put another way, the Good is its own reward if it is defined in terms of the flowering of health, education and welfare for the great majority of people, empowered, moreover, to manage their own affairs on a local, regional and ultimately global scale. This may be dreaming. But these are dreams that can awake us from the nightmare we are living. I would argue, in fact, that without these dreams we will never awake at all.