

Full Scale Nuclear

Social Order 239

Next Question

Taboo



After 15 years of full scale nuclear power production all the talk about decentralization will have become, in significant ways, meaningless. Monitoring deadly radioactive material for complete isolation from the living environment for a quarter of a million years can't be done on a neighborhood basis.

After 15 years of full scale nuclear power development the possibility of future generations deciding to forego the mixed blessing of high technological dependence will be eliminated by the sophisticated technical demands of radioactive waste storage. The priesthood of wastewatchers would be imperative and their ranks would have to be impervious to hubris or megalomania or madness for a few hundred thousand years. You think I'm exaggerating.

Nuclear energy production at the level projected would give powerful forces, in this government and others, the excuse to impose police state "precautions" to protect the nuclear fuel processing cycle. Actually, that's G.E.'s language; it's not exactly a "cycle" at all. But it would be a police state. Step right over here and empty your pockets onto the table here . . . Step right over here . . . Step right . . . Step. You think I'm exaggerating again. Visit any major airport.

Plutonium 239, one of the waste products of nuclear fission, has a half-life of 24,000 years. If you isolate a pound of it for twice as long as humans have had some form of civilized social order, you still have a half-pound left. A handful of Plutonium 239, sufficiently dispersed, would kill everything — everything that is except for blue-green algae. Nothing like having something to fall back on.

If the multi-national energy cartel is allowed to develop nuclear energy on the scale now envisioned, by the year 2000 the so-called peaceful use of atomic energy will be producing the radioactive equivalent of the explosion of 5 million Hiroshima type bombs *each year*. What radioactivity does to the living cell is an unfolding horror story we are just now beginning to understand. The more complex the organism, the more destructive is the radiation. The issues raised by this unique technology make the re-definition of our political and social relationships more urgent and more difficult.

Concerning the *primus agens* the philosophers have always spoken only in parables and symbols, so that their science might not be accessible to fools . . ."

Synesios, 4th century alchemist

There are few initiations left. We don't understand them anymore. They seem quaint and even undemocratic. So

drawing by Martin Carey



we have no culturally recognized mode, short of majority rule, of preventing a hiatus between power and maturity. A large part of the problem is that we don't have an understanding of the significance of taboo. We learn in school that the word is synonymous with hocus pocus.

But there *is* a difference between maturity and power. When maturity surpasses power the difference is called taboo, or, if we're lucky, democracy. When power surpasses maturity, the difference is called tyranny. Now the problem with classic democracy in this case is that with Plutonium 239 as part of the equation, the only properly constituted plebiscite would include a few hundred generations — and that's just homo sapiens. The questions about the future of the western democratic ideal are not rhetorical ones.

I shall not relate what is written in beautiful and clear Latin on all the other pages, for God would punish me for this, as I would be doing something worse than did he, of whom it is told, that he wished that all men on earth had a single head, so that he might cut it off with one stroke.

Nicholas Flamel, 14th century alchemist

There is nothing on the planet that so completely limits the range of possible choices for future generations as does nuclear power. Even if nuclear plants work perfectly, which they have not to date and will not in the future, and even if the radioactive materials don't get into the hands of terrorists, desperate neurotics, or craven megalomaniacs (official or otherwise), which is too much to hope for, and even if the DNA molecule, the biological key on this planet, escapes a crippling overload of radioactivity, which is by no means certain — even if things go perfectly, it's still a disaster. Because in fundamental ways, our great grandchildren are going to be stuck with our way of life. Politically, centralization will be important for the required social control. Culturally, a high technological orientation will be unavoidable. If that happens, the species gets shunted into a cultural, not to mention evolutionary, backwater. Like other extinct species before us, specialization, in our case centralized industrial monomania, will eventually leave us stranded by the karma of our own hurried success. By *us* I mean *them*; they're yet to be born. Who has their proxy?

Maturity is the wisdom not to use all the power you have. Taboo is what to do while you're waiting on the wisdom. It's not like law exactly. Laws are political; taboos, religious. If a taboo is to work, something has to be sacred. Your next question is precisely the right question.

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