

Apocalypse Now!

by Richard Evanoff

You've heard them before, those wild-eyed environmental prophets standing on street corners predicting the future ecological collapse of the world. They conjure up frightening visions of death and destruction, starvation and pestilence, anarchy and violence. Well, don't believe them. While their visions may in fact be entirely accurate, their timing is way off. Ecological collapse is not a future event; it's something that's happening right now. People are *already* dying from pollution and radiation, *already* witnessing the massive destruction of entire species and ecosystems, *already* starving because their food is sold for export in the global market instead of being consumed locally, *already* contracting horrible new diseases such as Minamata disease caused by corporate greed and indifference, *already* experiencing the breakdown of order in political, economic, and ecological systems, and *already* being exposed not only to violence in the streets but also to the "sanctioned" violence of governments and the military.

Now, if all these things disturb you, as they do me, I'm told that there's another group of futurists we can sign on with, namely, the equally wild-eyed visionaries who say that at some unspecified time in the future there will be a glorious revolution which will right all wrongs and usher in a new golden age of "liberty and justice for all." (Of course, every day school children in the United States stand before the American flag and recite the Pledge of Allegiance which ends with just those words. Since it's obvious, however, that we do *not* live in a society with liberty and justice for all, it's not hard to draw the conclusion that a free and just society must be some kind of future goal that it is our ultimate destiny to achieve.) Marxists see this as a classless communist society and Christian fundamentalists as a post-historical eternal life, but all of them place the millennium in a future time frame. Well, you can believe these self-proclaimed prophets if you want, but I think their timing is off too. The revolution isn't a future event; it's something that's already started.

Sure, for social visionaries who are already hip to the ecological vision it's tempting to treat the greed and corruption of contemporary civilization in apocalyptic terms: the beasts of ecological destruction will eventually be thrown into the lake of fire and a new earth will descend from the heavens. But the *deus ex machina* of "The Future Ecological Millennium" ignores the fact that real social change can only follow a real change in consciousness. Forcing social change before people's hearts have also changed will help the environmental movement about as much as the Revolution of 1917 helped the Soviet

Union or the conversion of Constantine helped Christianity. The revolution isn't wishful thinking about the future, but something that we can do right *now* by creating viable alternatives to the status quo. We can begin *now* to change our own wasteful ways of living, we can start *now* to confront the social system that encourages us to consume more and more, and we can work *now* to implement a new social system that will eliminate unnecessary production and yet supply every genuine human need.

The power for change starts with the individual, with the recognition that we are not isolated atoms in a mindless universe but integral parts of an organic whole. This very sense of connectedness is precisely what allows us to transcend our own narrow and selfish egotism by enabling us to identify ourselves with the rest of humanity and with nature. Rather than side with the forces of degradation and destruction we tap into the power of growth and renewal. We become the salt of the earth, winebibbing bodhisattvas returning incognito to the marketplace, working to change society from within. The power grows as it gets passed from person to person, until a critical mass is reached in which we are finally empowered to stand up and just say no to greed and environmental destruction and yes to ecological harmony.

Nonetheless, there is certainly a role for visionaries and prophets in the environmental movement. Before we can actually create the kind of society we would like to live in we must first be able to imagine it. Since this society does not yet exist, the imagination is the only place where we can test out our visions. This is the difference between political science and political philosophy (or for that matter between Aristotle's *Politics* and Plato's *Republic*). Political science is essentially descriptive in that it looks at existing political systems and attempts to analyze how they actually work (just as Aristotle did a survey of the existing political systems of his own day and tried to determine which was "best"). Political philosophy, on the other hand, tries to imagine what a good and just society would actually be like (in the same way that Plato attempted to sketch out what was, to his mind if not mine, the ideal state). If you're satisfied with our existing systems, stick with political science; if you aren't, why not try your hand (and brain) at political philosophy?

I think the old IWW slogan is just as pertinent to our times as it was three-quarters of a century ago (before the IWW was virtually crushed by a state hypocritically claiming to stand for freedom of speech and the right of assembly): "We are building the new society in the shell of the old." Like a chick breaking out of its shell we can no longer be imprisoned by a society bent on creating a monolithic global "culture" fueled by industrial growth and consumerism. And we do not need violence to achieve our goals. Our mission, as a recent Green slogan has it, is not to

overthrow the present system, but to *overgrow* it. And the kind of growth we're talking about can't be measured in terms of ordinary economic expansion or political power. It's the kind of growth that comes from a natural maturing process which is able to eventually transcend the infantile desires of greed, war, and destruction that our modern societies are ultimately based on.

As the prophets of old have told us, the wheat grows up with the tares. At the same time that we can see the mad-minded creation of a "new world order" — which in fact is rapidly and rabidly spreading economic, political, and ecological chaos throughout the world — we can also see the springing up of new social movements and forms of opposition. As resource exploitation companies speed up their exploitation of resources and the pollution of earth, air, and water, there is an increasing number of people who are beginning to fight back and to seek alternative lifestyles that go easier on the environment. As the large, multinational corporations "hollow out," eliminate jobs, and shut down factories, new worker-owned and worker-managed enterprises are flourishing. As mega-banks suck money out of local communities for mega-projects that give them mega-profits, ordinary folks are finding themselves obliged to create new cooperative financial institutions that reinvest their hard-earned savings back into their own communities. As governments, which are little more than the lackeys of capital, find it increasingly impossible to provide social services because the ever-richer don't want to pay for them and the ever-poorer can't, new forms of community support are emerging — often with the justified but thoroughly subversive attitude, "Who needs the government?" These social alternatives are necessary if we are to also create an ecological alternative to the rapidly crumbling status quo.

It's interesting to compare our modern crisis with the fall of Rome. As the "one world" of the empire began to crumble into ungovernable feudal serfdoms, the emperors tried to keep the minds of the masses off their real problems with "bread and circuses" — functions which the mass media and entertainment industries provide us with today. Anesthetics never last forever, however, and certainly they cannot be the final bliss we are following. So what will it be? A new world order of the medieval kind with the kings of government and the knights of capital greedily extending their domination over the earth and nature while the rest of us are reduced to peasants? Or an authentic new world order in which the lion lies down with the lamb and men beat their swords into plowshares in genuine ecological and social harmony? (Yes *men*, since we're the ones who need to repent for our dominant role in the reverse process.)

As a well-known poet once put it, "The line it is drawn / The curse it is cast / And the first one now / Will later will be last." Yes, the order is rapidly fading. The final battle has already begun. □