

The Annihilating Core

Guy Rundle

Facing extinction: will we consent to our own negation?

‘Is this the greatest TV series ever?’, a chorus in the progressive media asked as UK miniseries *Chernobyl* premiered across the world in May. It was not difficult to see why. Over five one-hour episodes, it tells the story of the 1986 nuclear disaster in the USSR in the Pripriyat/Chernobyl region of Ukraine, beginning at the point when the control team have been briefly stunned insensible after one of the plant’s four reactors has exploded. This event, after the reactor goes into meltdown, starts a process that would see one Hiroshima’s worth of radiation pumped into the planet’s atmosphere every hour for weeks on end. The series unfolds the narrow averting of a global catastrophe—the exposed core melting through a concrete foundation to the groundwater, blowing up the other three reactors and sending enough material into the air to make Eastern Europe and the western USSR permanently uninhabitable—through the partial, spot transformation of the Soviet system, the sheer enormity of the potential consequences emboldening bureaucrats and scientists to challenge the attempted political management of the event.

Perfectly crafted, *Chernobyl* is gripping in part because it follows the lead of 2018 film *The Death of Stalin*, in which the actors used their own British regional and class accents rather than meerkat-sounding Russian English, to bring the now historically distant USSR closer. In *Chernobyl* they went one better, eschewing the cod-*Nineteen Eighty-Four* representation of the USSR for something more accurate: the portrayal of a stuck society, with a layer of consumerism achieved, but now in slow decline. The series designers had clearly upended every warehouse in England for old orange 1970s bathroom tiles, cut-glass ashtrays (incessantly full of menthol butts), tacky patterned carpet and mustard floor tiles expertly scuffed. The USSR’s ’80s was our ’70s, or even ’60s, with everyone in nylon suits and print dresses. The phones, when officials reach for them, are like our old rotary phones, but not too wide, or too high, distorted as if in a dream. The switches on the control-room panels are in reverse. The world is familiar and other at the same time, an alt-modernity.

In a limited way, the show’s producers have been ‘lucky’. Several years in the writing, production and distribution, *Chernobyl* hit global screens, phones and watches at about the same time that a new wave of consciousness was break-

ing across the Western world and points beyond: hundreds of millions of people suddenly realised that major global events related to climate change and biosphere catastrophe are not five or six decades away but two or fewer; and that the control and command systems embedded in global politics, in market and national economies and in ideological production would not ‘clear’ to a minimum collective rationality sufficient to address the problem at the level required to solve it. They realised that, if anything, the intersecting layers of power, interest, ideology and opacity were getting worse, precisely as a response to a global event demanding a collective rationality and common purpose of a scale never before seen in human history, and quite possibly not achievable.

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This sudden realisation of the situation by a large mass of people—all in roughly the same terms, and with similar content—occurred, I would say, around the second half of 2018. No single thing caused it: in the manner of an event, the surrounding conditions reached a point of contradiction where something emerged that retroactively reframed what had produced it. It was, for example, the fact that Donald Trump was somehow, miraculously, still president, as it became clear that he was not merely malign but incompetent beyond the most basic demands of anyone running a nuclear power. It was soon clear that Britain was heading in the same direction; cleaved by the Brexit vote, its institutional arrangements were quite capable of delivering up a British counterpart to Trump, and so it has proved. Across the world, the triumph of media culture and the abstraction of masses of people from their own immediate interests has proceeded apace. Putin, the ridiculous Bond villain, gained initial support by reversing the grinding neoliberalism of the Yeltsin era; thereafter his crony petrostate has kept Russia in stasis. The same is true of Erdogan in Turkey, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Modi in India and possibly Jinping in China. The BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), once the hope of a post-Cold War Left, have succumbed to the same processes of identity affirmation that disfigure the West.

At the same time as this was being realised, something else was happening. The stark demand of the global school students' strike, and the leadership of Greta Thunberg, were soon matched by the multiple disruptions, in London, of Extinction Rebellion, showing that it was possible to multiply organise, within affinity groups, and bring a global city to a standstill. But I suspect that it was the very hope generated by this that produced the void that followed. General strikes and urban disruptions by their nature summon energy, then leave a void. The energy is exhausted yet the urgency remains—a situation not unlike finding that you have followed the manual and yet your reactor has exploded.



This is what it is like to walk through the world today—through the worlds of journalism, entertainment, commentary, academia, policy, governance, politics. From top to bottom, everyone is engaged in a shadow play, a minstrel show of order, as if a future of chaos and annihilation were not rushing towards us at the speed of light. This has a curious dilating effect on the politics of the day. Although the most explicit enemies of our actual survival may have killed us through a few decades' key delay—the oil companies that knew of the effects of carbon dioxide, the governments that covered for them, the ideological propagandists that constructed 'scepticism' out of outright denialism—they seem almost irrelevant to the process now under way. The overwhelming evidence, the greater public acceptance of it, the process of investment turnover has begun to undermine them in conventional terms, pushing denialism to a clownish obstinacy (Tony Abbott's figuring of wind farms as 'dark satanic mills', for example). Yet that simply clears the space for a more fundamental encounter.

In *Chernobyl*—oversimplified but reasonably true to life—the physicist Legasov is pulled into a Politburo meeting in the early stages of the disaster, as the mute accompaniment to Scherbina, the apparatchik charged with managing what has been presented as a minor, containable accident. As Gorbachev—still the pre-perestroika figure then piloting a now forgotten post-Brezhnevite strategy called 'acceleration'—moves to adjourn, Legasov, fighting his fear, interrupts, and pushes through to give the Politburo a snapshot of what (he surmises)

has occurred—a reactor explosion and the release of two atom bombs' worth of 'bullet-like' radiation, 'two Hiroshimas per hour, forty so far, every hour until the continent is dead'. The Politburo briefly reconvenes. What's significant is that this is not a tacky American TV-style moment in which an individual makes a call to the heart or the conscience. It's not predicated on the idea that the USSR was a cynical sham unmasked by passionate truth. Quite the opposite. *Chernobyl* gives a strong sense of the USSR's continuing viability—of a world no one inside can or need think outside of—and the shock of Legasov's statement is not based on a presentation of its moral failings but on the sudden realisation that it has produced from within itself the means not only of its own political destruction but of the destruction of the very humanity whose deliverance—to communism—is the end by which the system justifies itself as means.

For years, the wacky—now pernicious—Californian techno-optimists would talk of the first immortal human being having already been born. The possibility is now in millions of human heads that at some point not that far away the last person more likely to die individually, rather than in a vast mass event, will have arrived on earth.

Continually in *Chernobyl* the camera pans across Soviet public art—in swimming pools, science facilities, even otherwise shabby offices; abstract/futurist/sovietest renderings of life and hope—to emphasise the obvious falsehood of representations of the system, to anachronistically present it as a sham in which everyone participates, waiting for the system to collapse. No one in the series gives any impression other than that they will live their lives in this system, and that it is the horizon against which they make personal and ethical decisions. Its makers have been intelligent enough to understand that many people, from scientists to coal miners, were capable of drawing ethical succour from and taking noble action on behalf of their society in a way that relied on the Soviet, rather than Ukrainian or Russian, spirit and its, however fallen, representation of human hopes. Thus the full horror when Legasov reveals that the system

has created an annihilation machine, and one that cannot be turned off simply by barking orders and applying Leninist dictatorial force to the problem. Conceived in the spirit of Lenin's remark that 'communism is the Soviets plus electrification', the Soviet nuclear system had delivered something to the earth that it had explicitly been designed to surpass and distance us from: the capricious rule of nature over humanity. And not this or that contingent piece of nature either: the exploded reactor has weaponised the subatomic constituents of the composed atomic level in which form nature presents itself to us. Leninist hubris had reached into pre-nature and created the world killer from within the heart of rational action. Just as the radiation spewing from the No. 4 reactor was irreversibly destroying the forests, soil, water and people around it, the words that truthfully imparted the situation blew apart the discursive conditions—middling-stagnant modernity—on which the continuation of the Soviet system relied. Much of *Chernobyl* is about the complex interchanges of formal and informal power to keep the system going and the interleaving, interdependent logic of each, with institutions running only by unsystematised ad hoc processes, trading friendships and favours, which are nevertheless geared to keeping the formal systems on track.



There is no single reactor at the heart of our crisis, but it is the very asymmetry of the situations that makes *Chernobyl* a mirror that reveals by distorting. The reactor is everywhere, the system itself revealed as the process of its own slow, remorseless undoing, and as complex and 'unspeakable' as the Chernobyl crisis. Thus to attribute the intertwined crises of global warming, ocean acidification, life-chain collapse (insects, amphibians) and multiple mega-habitat destruction to capitalism as a sufficient cause is as in/accurate as blaming Chernobyl and its worst possibilities on Soviet socialism. From the intersecting upper levels of the actual profit motive and surging nationalism down to the deeper cultural levels of growthism and the transhistorical drive for human transcendence, the crisis is pitched at every level, a subatomic deconstruction of an atomised society.

Whatever small possibility there was twenty or thirty years ago that national and global powers could have a 'mass rationality' event in which the general interest overcame the particular has now passed without its occurring, and the hope that it might occur within, say, the next five years, now counts as magical thinking, if not outright religious faith. Like the emergency response in *Chernobyl* in which the least dangerous factors—a tar fire on the reactor's roof—have to be addressed before the annihilating core can even be approached, so the elements of the crisis are, in the current political frame, reversed outwards. For those of us attentive to the annihilating core of the present, the sudden rush forward of mass renewable energy on a mass business model is a cause for ambivalence at best: this is a search for power sources of a fashion and on a scale that will simply

preserve the social relations that reproduce and retransmit a sealing ideology but leave the deeper question—a question of being—unaddressed. Yet at the level of the political, 'before' one even gets to this middle level, the tar fire—outright denialism, direct corruption, market nihilism, centre-left politically steered cosmetic change—has to be addressed, if we are not to rush headlong into what one might call the pre-extinction take-off stage: a sudden transition that results in heating of 8 degrees or greater, or the general collapse of interlinked life-webs. This is now a real possibility—unlikely, but more than a mere formal possibility or statistical outlier—in the lifetime of young people alive today. For years, the wacky—now pernicious—Californian techno-optimists would talk of the first immortal human being having already been born. The possibility is now in millions of human heads that at some point not that far away the last person more likely to die individually, rather than in a vast mass event, will have arrived on earth.

The great annihilating core has been pumping this stuff out—'two Hiroshimas an hour, every hour'—and the common yet private mass realisation of it is essentially its quantitative/qualitative transformation. The radiation has reached the bones. Yet the realisation of this event cannot be accomplished as a single act of thought. Not only does the mind slide away from it, as do the practice and rhythms of everyday life, but so too does the inherited practice of left, and post-left politics. Because the annihilating core is working at both ends of

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the spectrum—burning through the earth, unknitting reality molecule by molecule—so too the process of acting in the world is being undermined by the creation of a radical disjunction between past, present and future, a process that not only undermines the capacity to formulate strategy but also challenges the very possibility of acting meaningfully.

Although it was conservatism, via Edmund Burke, that made a claim to ‘the compact of generations’, this has been inherent on the Left as intergenerational praxis: the development, post-1848, of a perspective on revolution-making that went beyond the term of a single life (in this, the European revolutionary Left simply repeated the journey of Christianity from single-generation apocalypticism to a historically open-ended project) and developed a set of practices, steadily refined, that not only created valuable political capital but were meaning-making. Although they did not remove the possibility of error, failure, regret, illusion or betrayal, these practices gave a promise that the activity of dissent and revolutionary activity had been meaningful—not merely psychologically satisfying but a potentially consequential intervention in being and in history—even if such reversals had occurred. That, for generations, has been the deep structure of radical left politics. Even its most audacious gambits—the Bolshevik project, the rapid rise of the counterculture—have occurred against the general background of that tradition, whatever particular features of it they may have dispensed with in the enactment of audacity.

Now? Now the very constituent matter—the very binding together of time, history and the individual political life—has been undone by the annihilating core. Whatever virtue there is in carrying on continuous political practices (chaotic abandon is no more meaningful than empty process), no one who has really felt the heat of the core can pretend that a continuity is preserved, that the core’s reaction is not working backwards through time, annihilating much of the transmitted past. This is true even for those of us who came to a depth-critical account of received frameworks of radical leftism some time ago. Even our proposed practices of post-political forms of social transformation, conducted in a more reflexive form than the New Left countercultural upsurge, are challenged by the annihilating core. Shallower and more dated forms, forms of Marxism above all, look as ridiculous as Morris dancing. That is perhaps unfair, but it’s striking that none of the ways in which a Marxist strategy steered by the pole star of proletarian revolution have been laid down has the capacity to frame or interpret the world in a way that allows a path to suggest itself or the dynamic organisation to roll it out. Thus even the most robust ‘far Left’ groups in the West—the ‘[Tony] Cliffite’ groups, of which the United Kingdom’s Socialist Workers Party was the most prominent, that offered a pure conception of socialism, constructing all previous regimes as ‘state capitalist’—have seen their numbers shrink, and internal scandals they would hitherto have weathered become tests of their legitimacy. Just as multiple crises become visible, such groups’ limited view of what constitutes the crisis limits their ability to take leadership of those stirred to action.

For the social-movement Left, which has come to be represented by Green parties globally, the reverse problem has occurred. In varying ways they have been drawn into systemic maintenance, making it impossible for them to fuse a notion of current governance turned towards transformation with the bodying forth of the crisis. This has happened in different ways. In Germany, as mainstream parties have seen their legitimacy collapse, the Greens have gained votes from both

sides, making them the imminent natural party of government, charged with multidimensional system maintenance. In Australia, by contrast, they have become the organic values party of a particular subclass, and the values of that group—above all, the radical identity politics of the LGBTQ movement—have become their core expression. Reshaped around this—piloting the accession to social centrality of a class and its values—the Greens are distanced from an expression of crisis politics.

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That representation of crisis has started to come from groups like Extinction Rebellion, whose most important characteristic is to name what is to be resisted as something beyond anything hitherto factored into social-movement politics. Not this or that oppression or despoilation—even when the ‘this’ or ‘that’ is the whole of the oceans or the chemical constitution of the atmosphere—but the undermining of the possibility of being itself.

This too has a double character for, at the moment, meaning can only come from a real effort to understand that the significance of this struggle comes from its being turned to face present extinction. It does not seem out of place to make the sorts of comparisons that usually attract the cry of ‘Godwin’s Law!’ The radical evil of what is currently occurring may have less collective intent than what it is being compared to, but its scope of destruction more or less evens it up. Quantity has a quality all its own. Watching a phalanx of three hundred drummers from Extinction Rebellion march down Piccadilly in London’s May sunshine the week after the yet-

again-delayed Brexit, bringing the city to a halt—a real carnival counterposed to the carnival of official politics—this writer felt a witness to something he had not felt before, despite having seen dozens, perhaps hundreds of demonstrations over decades: a determination that there should be some sort of interruption of the machine, and that they—that we—were not consenting to our negation/annihilation. A witness not, as hitherto, to the state, the people, the media, a global audience but to existence itself—to the eye of being; to say that we are here, that the catastrophe has fallen across our lives, that it is here and imminent, a witnessing to a future that may never happen, a present that will then never exist as a past.

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Usually in such situations one’s mind autonomously does the archiving, frames the present like stills from a future doco. None of that occurred in my head, watching this; the moment was as close to a pure present, to a core reaction, as one was likely to get. Inevitably, it also felt wholly, instantly, mediatised, like an outbreak from recent British dystopias *28 Days Later* or *Children of Men*. It’s one measure of the times that both those films—of an immediately prior period—require a supernatural element (a virus turning humans into zombie-automatons, and the sudden mass infertility of all humanity, respectively) to render the future as horror, when all that is now required is to look at it with a clear eye. Yesterday’s dystopias become today’s escapism, by offering a catastrophic that is unreal and thus never going to happen.

Hence the fresh feeling, the arrest, of *Chernobyl*—the catastrophe emerging from the real, in the new global culture, the vast middle that is long-form TV. *Chernobyl* can be seen—that is to say, used—as a way of bringing ourselves face to face with the catastrophic because it can be seen as about just about everything else that preceded it. About the failure of the Bolshevik project, and its successors; about the collapse of postwar Western social democracy in the stagnant ’70s—that carpet! those ashtrays!—about the 1984 UK miners’ strike (those northern accents) and the final collapse of working-class resistance to an all-encompassing Thatcherism. The series clears its own ground, as it were, to make the catastrophic confrontation possible.

That falls short, of course, not least because it is coming out of the medium that has swallowed vast amounts of resistant possibility in culture. Television had limits for decades, because it was episodic, mass, simple, dissolved into time; now that it is omnipresent, vast, oceanic, persistent, and of sufficient quality to be indrawing, it has finally triumphed as a parallel world, swallowing cinema and the novel as ‘high-mass’ critical forms in the process. These now have the approximate status of poetry and ceramics; we fund their continuation out of a vague unease as to what it would mean to turn our attention away from them altogether.

The dilemma is expressed in the form of this essay itself, trying to extricate the author—and offer the reader an argument that extrication is an immediate task—from the tendency to retreat from extinction’s edge by recourse to the media form that is the greatest culprit in obscuring it. Well, not the greatest culprit, alone. That dishonour might be shared with a section of the academic humanities that presents itself as the heir of critical, radical thinking and that has instead recentred such practices on a notion of philosophy that has not deepened the ground of social and material reflection but substituted it with a new metaphysics. Witness Alain Badiou’s repeated failure to make any sort of response to climate change that does not differentiate him from any standard right-wing curmudgeon bitter that the entire field of life’s political struggle has now been politically encompassed.

Compared to this challenge—the true exposed annihilating core, I would suggest—many contingent enemies are provisional, and situated to a degree. The mass response to the multiple crises we face will be of a form oriented to those levels of contingency, and will range across the world from mass refusals on an ever greater scale to the increasing possibility that political frames with authoritarian/totalitarian characteristics will offer themselves as desirable or necessary strategies for immediate action. This will require those of us who perceive the annihilating core as I have described it here—as of vastly greater depth than the system that threw it up—to build a global network of the (very few) who share such a perception. In doing so, the first step is to be attentive to and remediate our own desire to flinch in the face of catastrophe. That is less easily done when it is distributed through global institutions of language and practice than when it is an actual exploded nuclear reactor burning away, ready to kill the world. **a**

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The Foremost Donation of All
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