



The Nuclear Non-Option

If the cover of *TIME* magazine is any guide, attitudes to global warming have come a long way since it first made the cover in October 1987, when *TIME* went with the relatively neutral 'How the Earth's Climate is Changing, Why the Ozone Hole is Growing'. The 1990s saw a similarly restrained treatment, with stories on the vanishing ozone layer and the Rio Earth Summit.

It was only in April 2001 that a degree of urgency started to creep into *TIME*'s presentation, the cover showing an egg in a frying pan, a desert-yellow Earth digitally imposed as the yolk and the headline 'Global Warming — All Over the Planet We're Feeling the Heat. Why Isn't Washington?'

2002 saw a more optimistic outlook, with a special report on 'How to Save the Earth: The hot and wild weather is a

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sign of things to come. But fresh ideas and new technology can cool us down and make this a GREEN CENTURY'. However, the faith in good ideas and technology couldn't withstand Hurricane Katrina ('Are We Making Hurricanes Worse', October 2005) with global warming singled out as a possible factor in the severity of the storm. The recent 3 April cover was blunter still: 'BE WORRIED. BE VERY WORRIED'.

The justified and long-overdue concern with climate change has prompted many to reconsider nuclear power as a way of cutting greenhouse gas emissions. The ALP's Martin Ferguson and some Coalition MPs, for example, have proposed the nuclear option. While some of these advocates may be dismissed as having other motives than confronting global climate change — lucrative uranium exports to China for example — other advocates for nuclear power have advanced more considered arguments: for example, James Lovelock.

Lovelock is far from a cheerleader for the nuclear power industry. He's a critic of the current notions of development and his position springs from an extensive knowledge of the science of climate change and an unimpeachable reverence for the interconnectedness of life on the planet, as articulated in his Gaia theory, combined with an alarm at the complacency around the seriousness of global warming.

His proposal that we prepare for global warming as we would a war, with a total mobilisation of society — cited in this issue's essay by John Hinkson — and his image of a future in which the remnants of humanity trek to the arctic across barren stretches of wasteland, which concludes his latest book *The Revenge of Gaia*, is a sobering reminder of the disaster that awaits us if we maintain the current complacency. Lovelock doesn't regard nuclear power as a silver bullet that will eliminate CO₂ emissions. Rather, he views it as a stop-gap measure, allowing us the breathing space to address the heating of the planet.

Lovelock's is an authoritative argument, but nuclear power isn't a solution to global warming. As Alan Roberts argued in issue 78 of this magazine — the original, expanded version of which can be found in issue 23 of *Arena Journal* — even if it were possible to convert all the power stations in the world to nuclear power stations without adding to the levels of greenhouse gases, the impact would still be marginal, since generating electricity plays a 'significant but subsidiary' role in generating greenhouse gases.

Supposing the problems associated with nuclear power could be overcome, taken in isolation, nuclear power might begin to look like an attractive option. But placed back within the context of the international systems of states — itself a kind of living ecosystem, every bit as sensitive and respon-

sive to change and reverberation as the natural ones at the heart of Lovelock's Gaia theory — then things start to look quite different. The entry of nuclear power into the international state system is, in short, akin to the introduction and proliferation of a new species into an ecosystem.

To think that nuclear power will simply be a temporary measure which will then gradually be reduced as newer, safer fuels come online is fanciful. For

nation-states, nuclear power isn't just another means for generating power. It's bound up with deeply ingrained cultural meanings of progress and modernity; a means of being taken seriously on the international stage. While we might agree that such meanings are irrational, that doesn't make them any less potent.

This is to say nothing of the military applications of nuclear fuel. While military applications are not a straightforward outcome of civilian power generation and the business of building centrifuges to enrich uranium is a complex one, the likely outcome of any proliferation of nuclear power generation is to push us headlong into a new era of nuclear armament. Once admitted to the nuclear club, most nation-states will be reluctant to hand back their membership card.

Lovelock's response to those who warn of the dangers of nuclear conflict is to regard them as yesterday's problem. With some justification, he argues that many of the claims about the dangers of nuclear were overstated within the context of superpower rivalry of the Cold War, which he regards as a 'twentieth-century problem' — the dangers of which pale in comparison to the dangers of global climate change.

While the Cold War is unlikely to be repeated, Lovelock's is a remarkably static understanding of international politics. The best current illustration is of course is the current stand-off between Iran and the West over nuclear power. But even

leaving aside the military applications, and naively accepting that Teheran's arguments that their nuclear program is solely for civilian purposes, it's difficult to find good environmental grounds for supporting it. The search for more sources of power remains predicated on a culture that accepts no limits to development; one driven by the idea that the natural environment is no more than a storehouse of raw material to fuel economic growth at almost any cost.

In this regard, the West's opposition to Iran — or any other state pursuing nuclear power, for that matter — is hypocritical given that it is Western governments who fervently support this model of development as central to 'our way of life'. The proliferation of nuclear power is likely to exacerbate the culture of consumer capitalism rather than rein it in, simply reinforcing the idea that there are endless sources of energy to satisfy endless desires.

Far from being a band-aid, nuclear power is an infected dressing, polluting the wound that it was intended to heal while causing new sores. The only tenable solution to climate change is a change in the culture of unfettered consumption and unending development that has produced it. Or, as Lovelock succinctly puts it, 'As always, we come back to the unavoidable fact that there are far too many of us living as we do now'.

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From Precarity to Precarious

In Europe the anti-capitalist/anti-globalist movement is talking of 'precarity'. There is now even a *San Precario* in Italy. Precarity is the state of being experienced by casual and fixed-term contract workers, whose employment is precarious. Anxiety, forced competitiveness, a vision of life limited to the short term; all these are characteristic of precarity. *San Precario's* banner appears at anti-globalisation protests, turning them into mock processions of the new (or soon to be) poor led into an uncertain future by their patron Saint.

The spirit of *Precario* reappeared in France in early March, when Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin introduced his new remedy for youth unemployment: the 'First Job Contract' (CPE). De Villepin's law allows workers under the age of twenty-six to be fired without reason, within the first two years of their employment. The idea is that this will encourage employers to hire young people safe in the knowledge that they can easily free themselves of a worker who doesn't suit. Of course, others have argued that it allows bosses to simply remain free of obligations as they move from one twenty-four-year-old worker to another, providing a thin crust of employment rather than ongoing jobs. The strikes and protests that followed the passing of the CPE law, showed students and workers across France are prepared to resist a further increase in precarity.

France's ongoing 'reforms' of welfare and employment, of which the First Job Contract is the most recent and inflammatory, have been justified in the name of 'flexibility' and 'competitiveness'. These neo-liberal faith words are now familiar invocations, ritualised end points that mark the close of discussion about the function and effects of markets. They stand for our apparent covenant with the global market and the impossibility of thinking beyond its numinous

expanse. They are the terms the Australian government has used in the attempt to smooth the rocky introduction of its industrial relations laws.

It is important to see these industrial relations laws as part of an ongoing global transformation rather than as merely the vented resentment of a local band of anti-unionists whose time has finally come. Over-personalising these laws by attributing them to Howard's personal obsessions arrests our analysis at its first point, preventing a critical questioning of the cultural structures that allow such unpopular changes to be justified. It is, of course, vital to resist this Australian instance of precarity, as the ACTU has been successfully doing. At the same time, there must be a deeper questioning of the relation between market and culture, between what we buy and sell and the way we live and understand ourselves, a preparedness to offer a more radical critique of the present and explore social alternatives that go beyond the re-establishment of the erstwhile 'settlement' in industrial relations.

The other side of globalised consumption is a globalised labour market. The neo-liberal representation of the global market is as the ultimate horizon of choice that drives down the price of consumer goods. When the government compels Australians to remain 'competitive' and 'flexible' in their work, we begin to see that the true price of the flat-screen TV is the radical commodification of our own productive life, made available to unseen others in places never visited. The hidden precariousness of over-consumption — its dire waste of resources, its reliance on cheap oil, its unsettling power to replace humans with objects, its abstraction of social relations from proximate persons to desirable images — begins to be made explicit in labour laws that encourage employers to participate in a transnational race to the bottom level of conditions and wages. It is not simply that workers should be protected from the arbitrary power of bosses; it is that we need a fundamental change in the conditions that allow such exploitative laws to be justified in terms of over-consumption. The extension of precarity, set out in the new industrial relations laws and reaching so much further than the French CPE, should be recognised as an explicit instance of the more general condition of danger into which the neo-liberal order forces us all.

Until now, the Howard Government has been able to foreground consumption and channel the other — anxiety-producing — side of globalisation into fear of refugees and terrorism paranoia. These strategies have worked because they turn the worry outwards, projecting it onto shadow figures lurking *out there*. Part of the reason for their success is their close fit with the abstracting logic of global consumption. Here it has worked to abstract real suffering and real danger away from actual people and into images. This strategy of directing the flow of anxiety might begin to fail as the industrial relations laws turn the fearful eye inwards, bringing precariousness back home.

As this Government loses its ability to balance fear and consumption we can expect its increased reliance on authoritarian coercion. The illiberal approach to industrial relations emerges in the illiberal atmosphere of security anxiety, as those students occupying the Sorbonne found as police ejected them. Both set the scene for a dangerous future, beyond our domestic troubles, that will accompany the real retreat of neo-liberalism as it approaches its material and political limits. The explicit manifestations of a generalised precarity are the promptings we need to call up genuine alternatives to that future.

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