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The Saturation of the South

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I recently travelled through 80 communities in 8 southern states, on a commission from the Interreligious Economic Crisis Organizing Network. I met people who physicians and worker-health experts say are experiencing the symptoms of common industrial practices and the products of science and industry: liver, kidney and blood diseases; gastrointestinal diseases; central nervous system damage; anemia; headaches; miscarriages; cancers; infertility; diarrhea; numbness of feet and hands; decreased mental clarity; irritability; depression; depressed bone marrow functioning; leukemias; birth defects; growth retardation; immune system destruction; premature aging; premature deaths; genetic distortions. The list could go on.

A Region Ravaged and Intimidated

Living in what has long been the poorest region of the country, the people I talked with had endless stores of terrible tales to tell. I was told that people and animals come down with rare, unexplainable ailments, and die. That "silent springs" occur more and more, accompanied, by dying forests, discarded gardens, empty spawning grounds. That people begin to discover other people and places affected . . . then notice clusters, and begin to see broad patterns emerge. They described how they are routinely ridiculed and insulted, often called "unAmerican," by polluters, by health, environment, and "economic development" officials, and by politicians; and how neighborhoods, communities, urban and rural areas, and races are pitted against one another.

Fields once rich and fertile are no more. Fish kills in the millions commonly occur. Rita Carlson from Texas City told me, "We've got fish being caught with cancerous growths all over. West Galveston Bay doesn't have underwater vegetation anymore." People who had tended the fields, watched over the estuaries, and cared for the rivers said that the underpinnings of agriculture, aquaculture, wilderness, public health, animal life, economic activity, and rural community are being wiped out.

The South is saturated with poisons, and dominated by poisoners. Industrial producers, government producers, industrial users, government and industrial dumpers, along with government and industrial apologists, intimidaters, rationalizers, and liars, comprise the "productive" sector of society. They pour money into advertising and public relations, as they seek to shape public debate with images that obscure, words that deceive. They buy scientists, health officials, newspaper owners, police departments, environmental protection departments, politicians, and even physicians.

People who had never protested anything in their lives, who had always trusted government and industry officials, are now struggling to save themselves and their communities. "We don't want to leave a legacy for our children and grandchildren that we didn't try to stop the polluters," said Ramona Stevens of near Baton Rouge. "If we don't stop them, chemicals are going to be the end of the world as we know it. "

[IMAGE: **REST IN PEACE?** A Union Carbide plant looms, ominously, over a 19th century cemetery in St. Charles Parish (near Taft, La.) Courtesy Sierra Club, New Orleans]

People such as Ramona are joining with other victims to form groups which -- given what they face -- are extraordinarily polite, groups like Citizens For A Safe Environment, in South Carolina; People Concerned About MIC (the Bhopal poison) in West Virginia; the Louisiana Environmental Network; the Minority Peoples' Council, in Alabama . . . They hold bake sales and car washes to raise money to find out what is happening to them; to publish small newsletters; to petition their governments; to question highly-paid industry and government experts at pollution hearings; to get together with other groups to compare experiences, figure out how to join forces.

Those who want to see have only to go to these places and look. There is also no shortage of documentation. A handful of local newspapers have been diligent. Reports done by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), and numerous citizens groups, confirm the tales of woe:

The documents show that millions of acres in the South have been strip-mined, clearcut, and otherwise ravaged by great machines. Heavy metals -- lead, arsenic, zinc, cadmium, mercury -- are strewn about. So are synthetic organic chemicals, made from petroleum. And radioactive fission products. As Rachel Carson once wrote, "no responsible chemist would think of combining in his lab" the multitude of chemicals that are jumbled together when dumped. In 1985, companies in the USA generated 500 billion pounds of synthetic organics (compared with one billion pounds in 1940). Industry now uses 65,000 different chemicals, adding 1,000 new ones each year. Only a handful have been tested, despite the evidence of chemical links to the diseases and disorders listed earlier.

Over 400,000 firms generate products capable of producing these ill-effects. Some 25,000 companies transport them, by truck, ship, and plane. Another 25,000 companies store, dump, or "do" things to them, which they are arrogant enough to call "treatment."

More than half the nation's petroleum refining and chemical production takes place in factories located between Corpus Christi, Texas, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana -- a stretch of

about 400 miles. Scores and scores of factories are strung along shorelines of rivers and bays. Their thousands of miles of pressurized pipes intertwine like infinite pretzels.

I drove along the meandering Mississippi in Southern Louisiana, past 60 factories. My eyes, nose, and mouth burned the whole way. I drove in and out of small, poor, mostly unincorporated, minority communities that go right up to the companies' chain link fences. I saw children playing in schoolyards, talked to people who long ago stopped farming or planting gardens, who gave up fishing and hunting, who told of buried children, mass burials of livestock, and buried friends and relatives dead at early ages of mysterious ailments becoming increasingly common. I was told that people in these communities rarely had opportunities to work at these plants, and that the communities had no authority to collect taxes or oversee what these plants did. I was told that in 1986, 18 petrochemical plants in just two parishes had legal permits to spew 196 million pounds of chemicals into the air.

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I saw warning signs along the Mississippi levee, at outfall pipes, like the one that said: "Danger: Carcinogens in the Air."

Throughout the South, from Charleston, West Virginia, to Oak Ridge, Tennessee, people led me to the factories most Americans know only as cute logos promising progress and benevolence: Borden, Allied, Texaco, BASF, Dow, Dupont, Monsanto, Westinghouse, Conoco, Texasgulf, Champion Paper, Georgia Pacific, Occidental, General Electric, Rockwell International, Diamond Shamrock, Firestone, Kaiser.

They showed me the places which make vinyl chloride, trichloroethane, carbon tetrachloride, benzene, styrene, aldrin, xylene . . .

My guides told me these companies produced more than 1.5 billion pounds of bug killers from these and other chemicals last year. The production involved 1,200 to 1,400 active ingredients, 2,500 intermediate products, 50,000 enduse products. Some 10,000 airplanes sprayed them over 180 million acres. Thousands of farmers and farm workers spread them from ground level.

The companies and the government designate about 300 million tons each year of mingled chemical products so dangerous and undesirable that even they cannot transform them into consumables. This material they call "wastes." It has to be put somewhere, and/or something has to be "done" to it . . . preferably somewhere else.

Much production, that is, that which has not become "fugitive emissions" or "permitted excursions" (i.e., ignored leaks); or which has not been released by accident (between

1980-1985, there were 900 acknowledged chemical accidents in the South); or which has not evaporated from "surface impoundments" (i.e., spread through the air from putrid, fetid, poisonous ponds); or disappeared as "planned leakages" (i.e., dumped); or been diluted, concentrated, aerated, solidified, filtrated, landfarmed onto open fields (i.e., "treated"); or tossed onto rural highways or into sewer systems or down old holes in the ground, is poured into what are called "injection wells" (i.e., deep holes drilled through wetlands, aquifers, or whatever is there). Louisiana has poured over 252 billion pounds of deadly products into wells, 31 billion' pounds in 1986 alone.

The poisons not poured down wells, or sold to consumers, or shipped to other industries for their own specific minglings end up joining all the other deadly junk routinely thrown away in "sanitary landfills" (i.e., pits lined with plastic or clay), or "unsanitary landfills" (i.e., pits). The EPA concedes that 77 percent of the thousands of dumps now taking deliveries may be leaking; that 70 percent of all dumps closed to new deliveries may be leaking. At as many as 600,000 dumps, EPA may need to do what is called "remedial action," according to OTA. To "do" just 10,000 dumps, OTA says, will cost over \$100 billion.

The South is blessed with the biggest "permitted" somewhere-elses in the nation. The largest is in Emelle, Alabama, a cattle and agricultural county of 17,000 people, mostly black. Each week, 10,000 tons of products arrive from out of state and out of country, via 150 trucks per day, enriching Waste Management, Inc., but impoverishing the residents and laying waste the land.

In the South also are about 40 factories called "incinerators," for burning discarded poisons. The producers and politicians are trying to convince communities to embrace dozens of new ones. They say people should want incinerators because they bring jobs, growth, international competitiveness, and national security, just like the dumps.

Radioactive products also are piling up in the South. Industry, military, and government officials are looking for hospitable places to locate "low level nuclear waste dumps," "high level nuclear waste dumps," and "retrievable nuclear waste dumps." Not for a minute do they consider cutting back or stopping their daily production of nuclear materials. Boosters in West Virginia are offering some of their abandoned coal mines -- perhaps encouraged by proposals in Congress to pay sweeteners of \$100 million per year -- to the lucky county.

The Management of Destruction

If this destruction and poisoning were a once-in-a-blue-moon blunder, an oversight, a glitch, a miscalculation, a regrettable error, we could reasonably expect that those "adults," firms, and agencies responsible would be moving swiftly to stop the poisoning now, to repair the harm, to treat the victims, to make restitution, and to find safe ways to make the products the nation truly needs and wants. But as people told me wherever I travelled, the adults are stepping up production. Seeking more dumps. Intensifying their intimidation of victims.

To the EPA, the South is known as Region IV. In no community I visited in Region IV did I find a single person with a kind word to say about the EPA, or about any state or local health or environment or "economic development" agency. From what I heard, they are mostly into crowd control.

The adults, many of whom are pillars of their communities, have responded thusly to questions and complaints: they do not acknowledge what they have done and continue to do; they choose not to install air and water monitoring; they choose not to conduct medical tests, even of the children living alongside their pipes, and even when disease clusters are well known; they choose not to see the liver damage and the miscarriages or the streets across the South which parents have renamed "Leukemia Alley."

Our government officials are standing tall next to the producers, Ronald Reagan's Mr. Clean, William Ruckelshaus, the man who succeeded Ann Gorsuch as EPA administrator, has made **his** particular contribution to silence and denial. To people suffering suppressed bone marrow functions, birth defects, or premature aging, he offered his scientific theorem of "risk." All life is a risk, he said. "The question facing this country is no longer **whether**, but **how**, we are going to involve citizens in risk management decisions." What he meant, of course, given that citizens have no power over production decisions, was that we should help him do his job of helping the producers to manage our own death and destruction.

Today, under Ruckelshaus' successor, Lee Thomas, EPA is regarded by the people I met as a joke. "Better it shouldn't exist," many told me. "At least then people wouldn't feel so deceived. When you write your articles, make sure you say that social justice and environmental movements are losing."

Samuel Hayes of the University of Pittsburgh documents proposals for ambitious public health protection and management control, which some lawmakers and citizens in the 1960s were seeking. Looking back, we can see that the country might have adopted stringent standards, such as these, proposed in a 1970 National Cancer Institute report to the Surgeon General:

No levels of exposures to a chemical carcinogen should be considered toxicologically insignificant for man . . . No substance developed primarily for uses involving exposure to man should be allowed for widespread intake without having been . . . tested for carcinogenicity and found negative.

Such recommendations, along with strict enforcement of laws, went out the window, like the fugitive emissions.

Stopping the Poisoning Now

What is taking place today in the South cannot be dismissed as the "externalities" of the production which has brought us the "good life." It cannot be defined as a "toxics waste problem," or a "pollution control problem," or an "environmental management problem." Rather, the people of the South face multiple economic and societal injustices, which are spreading poverty and disease. These injustices exist because investment and production decisions are being made by people whose institutional values are hostile to life and nature,

antithetical to justice and democracy.

The adults who manage the money and the production decisions may be nice people in their families, in their communities, in church and charity work. That's not the point. The institutions -- giants of finance, production, marketing, advertising, research and development -- operate intentionally, deliberately, relentlessly -- and cohesively -- in pursuit of their production, control, and monetary goals. They have convinced many that their goals and our goals are one and the same. As insurance, they have held our jobs, our economy, our communities, our national security, as hostage.

When William O. Douglas became director of the Securities and Exchange Commission in 1937, he went into the inner sanctums of the banks and the stock exchanges and announced that some way had to be found of "obtaining directors who will represent the public interest."

Today, that's the least we must do with the producers. The question facing this country is not **whether**, but **how**, we as citizens are going to share the shaping of our economic, health, and environmental futures with management. Not **whether**, but **how**, some managers will have to be introduced to the criminal justice system. Not **whether**, but **when**, deadly products will be banned, killer factories closed, and people freed for safe and decent work.

Wendell Parris, from Emelle, Alabama, told me:

The overwhelming presence of the multibillion dollar Waste Management, Inc., in Sumter County is such that unless we can do something in systematic fashion around organized struggle to combat it, we will be so wedded to Waste Management that it will be impossible to get away from it.

Such an observation could be made all across the South.

So we have to stop the poisoning and the impoverishment, but we would be smart to try to do so in ways that break the power of the poisoners and impoverishers. It will mean shattering the nation's deafening silence on management decision-making. It will mean revealing the false justifications and deceptive images the poisoners have been using to obscure the truths of what they do. It will mean increasing the power of our communities in relation to the producers. And it will mean building sturdy, effective, multi-racial community-worker alliances.

Our nation has a history of people who have articulated the values of life, land, community, equity, and democracy, and who have organized to bring about great change.

Individually and collectively, we are able to envision thriving communities existing interdependently with their surroundings, choosing to produce only what they want and need, in ways which complement nature, not destroy it.

Ecological historian Donald Worster has suggested that "Every generation . . . writes its own description of the natural order, which generally reveals as much about human society and its changing consciousness as it does about nature." [1] We who can see can stop seeing through the distorted glasses of the producers. We who can speak can stop speaking their tongue. And we all can rewrite our own description of the natural order through our deeds.

The South is saturated. But there are people throughout the South who believe they can stop the poisoning and transform the poisoners. Common sense, they told me, says that we can use the resources of this nation and our own labor to live decent, comfortable lives.

People in the South are stirring. Organizing. They are still isolated and alone, and not yet very loud. But, as Larry Wilson of the Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens put it:

It's said that the people down here are too ignorant, too afraid. They're none of these. They're cautious. They're strong. They're slow moving. But no one can stop them once they get going.

1. *Nature's Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 292.

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