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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Fate of The Earth

By Jonathan Schell

Alfred A. Knopf, N. Y., \$11.95

Although nuclear weapons have been with us for 37 years and isolated voices have been warning that we were on an accelerated course towards annihilation, only recently have large numbers of people throughout the world realized the imminent danger and begun to take political action to avert a catastrophe.

The consciousness of the threat posed by the nuclear arms race was sufficient to mobilize people into the beginnings of a political movement. For such a movement to become effective, however, an understanding of the nature of the threat and its causes must necessarily follow the instinctive perception of the danger.

Recently several books have appeared which attempt to provide this understanding and to chart future courses of action. One of the most popular of these is Jonathan Schell's, *The Fate of the Earth*. This book, which first appeared in three consecutive issues of *The New Yorker*, consists of three independent parts.

The first part, "A Republic of Insects and Grass," is a careful and thorough examination of what is currently known or predictable of the effects and consequences of a full-scale nuclear war.

Based on governmental and scientific studies, interviews with scientists, pronouncements of government leaders, and the tragic experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Schell presents compelling evidence that the dangers we face are real with drastic consequences. He forcefully demonstrates that concepts such as limited nuclear war, survivability of a nuclear attack, reasonableness of civil defense, and economic recovery from a nuclear war, are dangerous myths whose reality exists only in the words of political demagogues.

He considers the possible causes of an outbreak of nuclear war and gives a serious and objective presentation of its medical, ecological, and global consequences.

It is in this first part that Schell introduces the major theme of the book: the threat of extinction of the human species. The point is made that -

- although scientifically speaking, there is all the difference in the world between the mere possibility that a holocaust will bring about extinction and the certainty of it, morally they are the same, and we have no choice but to address the issue of nuclear weapons as though we knew for a certainty that their use would put an end to our species.

This moral equivalence of nuclear war and its worst consequence underlies most of the arguments presented throughout the book.

The first essay, "The Republic of Insects and Grass," is an excellent, concise explanation of the nuclear weapons threat. Unfortunately in the rest of the book the author abandons his journalistic objectivity and takes on the role of philosopher. As a consequence, his arguments are weak with serious flaws.

The second part, "The Second Death," begins with the argument that since nuclear weapons are a product of scientific discovery and since once a scientific fact is established it cannot be unlearned, nuclear disarmament will not erase the threat. This fatalistic approach denies the existence of social and political free will and implies that social decisions are based on what is possible rather than what is desirable.

With statements such as the

"fundamental origin of the peril of human extinction by nuclear arms lies not in any particular social or political circumstances of our time but in the attainment by mankind as a whole, after millenia of scientific progress, of a certain level of knowledge of the physical universe," he comes close to paralleling the theological concept of original sin, and precludes the possibility that political or social changes can eradicate the nuclear peril. With such simplistic arguments he nears joining the bandwagon of the antiscience.

After we are presented with a series of negative arguments we are left with the somewhat contradictory and tantalizingly vague conclusion that "the only kind of solution . . . is a global political one."

Schell then embarks upon a lengthy exploration of the moral and philosophical significance of the extinction of the human species. At this point the book takes on the aspect of a medieval theological treatise. Long and convoluted disquisitions on extinction may have some intellectual value but are out of place in a serious examination of a crucial contemporary problem.

The second part is a well-written discussion of the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD).

Having done his best to convince the reader that the problem of nuclear weapons has most serious consequences and is insoluble by social or political means, Schell in part three, "The Choice," attempts to present a solution. His solution, briefly, is to eliminate national sovereignty and "create a political means by which the world can



"I Love a Parade" from *Boston Street Scenes*
By Tom Knudson, Associate Professor of Physical Education

arrive at the decisions that sovereign states previously arrived at through war." This is like saying that the cure for cancer is immortality. It is not a solution whether one believes such a nationless world to be desirable or not. Its achievement is a larger and harder task than removal of the nuclear danger itself. Moreover, it is not a solution because it avoids the questions that must be answered before a real solution is found, questions such as: What are the social, political, and economic reasons for the ever increasing stockpiling of nuclear weapons by the superpowers? What real function do the nuclear arsenals perform?

Schell's many references to social/psychic ills suggest that nations face what is essentially a psychological problem. Such a statement as "a society that systematically shuts its eyes to an urgent peril to its physical survival and fails to take any steps to save itself cannot be called psychologically well" implies that the social and political health of a nation depends upon its psychological stability. If such is the assumption, the elimination of national sovereignty would be somewhat akin to collective psychoanalysis.

The author's thesis might be best summarized by his choice for a title. In Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary we find:

fate . . . the principle or determining cause or will by which things in general are supposed to come to be as they are or events to happen as they do . . . whatever is destined or decreed . . . final outcome . . . a predetermined state or end.

If the intention of the author was to provide some guidance to the infant nuclear disarmament movement he might have chosen a different title since, as Norm Chomsky says in his book *Toward a New Cold War*,

"the drive towards . . . eventual nuclear destruction is the result of human decisions taken with human institutions that do not derive from natural law and can be changed by people who devote themselves to the search for justice and freedom."

Rabbit is Rich

By John Updike
Alfred A. Knopf, \$13.95

Readers of *Rabbit Redux* will recall how, at the close of that novel, Harry Angstrom -- unemployed, his home destroyed by fire and a girl dead in the ashes -- lay beside his wife Janice in a motel bed and tried to sleep. His life had come apart. Janice had just returned, hoping to work out a reconciliation with Harry after her affair with Charlie Stavros, her father's 'chief sales representative' at the used-car lot. Nelson, their son, has judged his father responsible for the death of the runaway girl, Jill. In the motel room, "long and secret as a burrow," Harry finally sleeps.

Ten years later, Updike has once again brought Rabbit out of hibernation, in his mid-forties, a paunch around his middle, and dwelling with his wife and mother-in-law at the Springer family home on Joseph Street. For now, as 'chief sales representative' for Springer Toyota, Rabbit, with the timely help of the 1979 oil embargo, is peddling Corollas almost as quickly as they can be displayed on the lot. His marriage with Janice has arrived at a plateau of mutual tolerance, if not affection. Nelson is away at Kent State. Only life in his mother-in-law's house grates on him, but since Bessie Springer still controls a half share of the Toyota agency, Rabbit has managed to accommodate himself.

His accommodations, we learn from the novel's opening pages, extend even to Charlie Stavros who now works as Harry's chief assistant and whose affair with Janice has been covered over by the events of the intervening years. Harry has had to make his peace with Charlie because Charlie knows how to sell cars; he has connections.

Yet, Harry has connections, too. As he drives his tomato-soup red Luxury Edition Corona through Brewer, Harry comments to himself on all that he knows about this Pennsylvania town, which after three novels has become for the reader nearly as distinctive in its landmarks, businesses, and people as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. Brewer mingles old factories and hard-working blue-collar labor with concrete and glass offices and leisure-suited businessmen. As America has changed, Brewer has changed, and Harry has accommodated himself to this simultaneously old and new place with its present demands and past obligations.

No one, it seems, judges Harry's past harshly now. A decade's passing has effaced the disasters and dislocations of all the deaths: his infant daughter, his parents, Fred Springer, Coach Tothero, Jill the runaway, Skeeter. The dead, however, occupy Harry's thoughts as he wonders how they would regard his life. Throughout the novel these ghosts from Rabbit's past appear ". . . and beyond them there are myriads, whole races like the Cambodians, that have drifted into death. He is treading on them all, they are resilient, they are cheering him on, his lungs are burning, his heart hurts, he is a membrane removed from the hosts below, their filaments caress his ankles, he loves the earth, he will never die." Accommodated to others' deaths, Rabbit still runs from his own.



"Telephone Booths" from *Boston Street Scenes*
By Tom Knudson, Associate Professor of Physical Education

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Two additional accommodations remain unmade; two more judgments have been left suspended. Coincidentally, both assert themselves on the same day. A young couple from the farm country around Brewer come to the lot shopping for a Toyota. The girl, in her late teens, reminds Rabbit of the daughter he might have had by Ruth, his mistress of long ago who had moved to the country and married a farmer. Rabbit very quickly finds himself believing that the young man with the girl is not suitable for her, and the girl as she leaves, inquires whether Rabbit had ever been a "famous basketball player," telling him " 'you just have that look.' " And so, throughout the novel, Rabbit wonders about this possible daughter and what he might belatedly do to atone for his neglect and to replace the dead infant, Becky.

Arriving home from Springer Toyota, Rabbit learns that Nelson will be returning from Kent State or, as it turns out, Colorado, where his summer job has fallen through. News of the addition to his domestic arrangements fills Rabbit with anger and indignation over having not only to accommodate Nelson at the house but perhaps at Springer Toyota as well. Harry senses that Nelson -- that "twerp" -- is coming home to cajole his way into the family business by recalling for his father how the Springers made a place for Rabbit when he was down and out and how they had an obligation to provide a place for Nelson. The son's return rekindles Harry's anger against Janice: "It was his wife's fault. The entire squeezed and cut-down shape of his life was her fault; at every turn she has been a wall to his freedom."

Thus, in the opening pages of *Rabbit Is Rich*, we see that Harry's life is something akin to the Toyota Corona he so much enjoys driving. Necessity has brought him to this Japanese car, filled with sporty extras, but even these cannot overcome the fact that for Rabbit the interior is cramped, the seat confining. Movement in the car is awkward and Harry, the once graceful athlete, is disturbed by awkwardness and his inability to move freely.

Behind Rabbit's anger is the ghost of Skeeter, the angry young black of *Rabbit Redux* who, Rabbit has learned from a newspaper clipping, has been shot by Philadelphia police. For Harry, with Skeeter dead, "a certain light was withdrawn from the world, a daring, a promise that all would be overturned." Nonetheless, "with him dead, Rabbit feels safer." This ambivalence carries through the novel: the urge to accommodate and soften past judgments pressured often by the desire to break clean and be free.

Even among his friends, Harry feels discomfort which becomes more acute as the novel develops. Golf with Ronnie Harrison, Webb Murkett, and Buddy Inglefinger at the Flying Eagle Tee and Racquet Club at first anchors Harry in his new social positions. But, at one point, "in pursuit of such happiness, Harry feels guilty, out on the course as the shadows lengthen, in the company of these three men, who away from their women loom as boring as they must appear to God." Webb and his young wife Cindy, Buddy and his girlfriends, and Ronnie, whose wife, Thelma, it turns out, adores Rabbit, all seem to be chasing something -- youth, novelty fulfillment -- that Rabbit realizes is no longer theirs to be caught.

We live through a summer with Harry, through Nelson's return and entry into the Toyota business, his arguments, spurred by resentment, with Harry, and through Nelson's marriage with Pru and the birth of the granddaughter. Nelson is a "twerp" and

Broken lives surround us as well, and lives, if not broken, desperately trying to hold together.

a nasty, manipulative one at that. Harry learns how little he can tolerate his son, not because Nelson's life in many of its details recapitulates Harry's, but because Nelson refuses to fight back. In perhaps the novel's most touching scene, Harry and Nelson are driving in the Corona to the lot a few days before Nelson's marriage, and Harry, trying to help his son, tells Nelson to get away, not to let the women encircle his life. Nelson remains sullen and refuses to go; he is afraid. It is at this moment that Harry understands he has done for Nelson all he can.

And, late in the novel, Harry finally journeys to visit Ruth, to see whether there's anything he can do for her. Like him, she has grown old and fat. She turns him away, having made her life for many years without him. The girl, she tells him, is not their daughter; Harry doesn't believe her nor do we. But Ruth's life -- and her daughter's -- will go forward without Harry. As Rabbit says goodbye to Ruth, "both know, what people should never know, that they will not meet again."

Rabbit is Rich is about an infectious America. Its details, its milieu surround our own lives. The car agencies, the fast food franchises, suburban subdivisions, arriviste

country clubs, modish restaurants and trendy shops are as much a part of Brewer, Maine as they are of Brewer, Pennsylvania. Updike immerses us in the America we cope with and, if we're lucky, master everyday. The noise and movement, the activity and opportunity are present for those lucky enough, and Rabbit is lucky enough -- everything he touches seems to turn to gold -- to take advantage of them.

Broken lives surround us as well, and lives, if not broken, desperately trying to hold together. Too much movement is wasted, too much activity merely frantic, too much opportunity false. Harry, by the time we leave him, has grown more reflective and more hopeful. Though Harry has at one point thought that "the world keeps ending but new people too dumb to know it keep showing up as if the fun's just started," alone in his own home at the end, his infant granddaughter "in his lap, his hands, a real presence hardly weighing anything, but alive," Harry understands he has his "heart's desire, a granddaughter -- his -- another nail in his coffin -- his."

The novel's ambivalence is accommodated but left in soft focus. Perhaps not for long. We have learned in these early autumn weeks that Updike's Henry Bech is back. I suspect that Rabbit will return to usher us into another sharper age.

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Wealth and Poverty

By George Gilder
Basic Book, Inc. \$14.95

Minorities and women appear to have run aground on the shoals of America's economic ills. As President Ronald Reagan made clear to the nation in his inaugural address, he "did not take the oath I've just taken with the intention of presiding over the dissolution of the world's strongest economy." Rather, Reagan proposed that all "must share in the productive work of this 'new beginning,'" and all "must share in the bounty of the revived economy." Reagan then announced submission of his radical economic policy to

the Congress with the assertion that the policy must pass both the House and the Senate--virtually intact.

Almost simultaneously with President Reagan's inauguration a book appeared by George Gilder -- the Title -- *Wealth and Poverty*. This book created a furor in the media as some perceived the relationship between Reagan's economic policy in general, supply-side economics in particular, and Gilder's "theology of wealth and poverty." Gilder's theology for supply-side economics consists of a variety of arguments for "faith, family and production," with frequent forays into the revered reproductive role of women in society. The book could aptly be titled *The Garden of Eden Revisited*, or, in the vernacular, *Eve Bites the Apple--Again*.

The author of *Wealth and Poverty* is not an economist. Gilder has, however, written other works including *Visible Man*, a study of poverty. The methodology of *Wealth and Poverty* appears to be historical, anecdotal, and to an extent, analytical. To accomplish the creation of his theology, Gilder employs a persuasive rhetorical style -- his rhetoric is laced with biblical allusions and language. He utilizes this strategy to develop two themes: one, the biblical precedent for his economic dogma; and two, his case against even the concept of discrimination in America. Simply put, Gilder believes that women, given their role in the reproduction of the species, are by nature superior to men. Hence, to allow women into the marketplace, except as an auxiliary work force, is to add insult to the initial injury.

Answering the charge that "Capitalism is morally vacant," Gilder's major themes of wealth and poverty are grounded in the principles of work, family and faith -- a neat fusion of capitalism and Christianity. As Gilder says, "Capitalist production entails faith -- in one's neighbors, in one's society, and in the compensatory logic of the cosmos. Search and you shall find, give and you will be given unto, supply creates its own demand." This "sequential logic" allows Gilder to develop his theories of wealth and poverty. Wealth can only be attained through the correct functioning of work, faith and family. Poverty, on the other hand, is arrived at through the incorrect functioning of these elements.

Through a series of examples and statistics, Gilder warrants his claims by describing the condition of single men (they earn less, work less hard than married men). He further documents his case by reviewing the plight of the black man in America (they are deprived of work by feckless black and white women, as well as the federal government). Consequently, one consistent vision emerges: the ideal

condition for a productive America is that of the working male (major breadwinner), married to a woman who at worst earns "mad" money. This working male is ideally encumbered with a mortgage and several children. This combination of work, debt and children works in tandem with "faith." When this idyllic situation occurs, the male, inspired by his responsibilities and his veneration of the womb, tends to work harder, longer and more innovatively. Ultimately, this formula will assure a new high in American productivity.

For her part, the woman (if she is true, and Gilder indicates she might not always be so) will care for the home, the children, the community and the church. If required, she will be available for "secondary" work. The continuing faithfulness of the husband to his affairs and the faithfulness of the wife to her affairs indicates the strength of their participation in the Capitalist/Christian union. If the communicants endure, America can continue to be "the world's strongest economy."

Given Gilder's attitudes about women, his almost mystical reverence for the womb and his concern for black men, one hesitates to label Gilder either a racist or a sexist. Gilder's theories are derived from biblical mythology and are, I think, consistent with the contemporary social, political and legal fictions flourishing in America in this decade. For me, Gilder makes explicit that which is implicit in the culture.

Further, I think that Gilder fears women, believing them to be earth goddesses incarnate. In an earlier essay on social inequality, Gilder says that "males are the sexual outsiders and inferiors." He then asserts that "Women, in fact, possess

enormous power over men," adding that women have "a deep and inexorable power."

According to Gilder, males must balance this power. He sees the marketplace as a way of "being made equal by society." Males neither give nor receive adequate spiritual nourishment. To compensate, males create a society which gives them superiority, arid though it may be. This is a terrible state of affairs. Gilder's masterwork, this citadel of economic enlightenment and productivity, this lengthy explanation of supply-side economics and dazzling rationales for racism, sexism, exploitation and discrimination in America proves to be a tale woven for a winter's night to allay a small boy's fears.

True, America is in economic trouble; social problems mount. Americans are feeling the effects of this latest economic panacea and its attendant mythology. When life worsens for all persons (with the exception of that legal fiction, corporations as persons), perhaps Americans will reflect on motivations for radically harmful and mythologically deficient theories for economic and social change. *Wealth and Poverty* provides a starting point for reflection.

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"Two Different Worlds" from Boston State Scenes
By Tom Knudson, Associate Professor of Physical Education