

For zero growth fanatics, nothing could be worse

The following excerpts are from the Los Angeles Times, April 19, 1989, p. V-1 ("View") section, "Fear of Fusion: What If It Works?" by Paul Ciotti, Times Staff Writer. They exhibit how obsessive the irrational element in our society is about refusing to give up technological pessimism. Paul Ehrlich is the author of The Population Bomb, and Rifkin wrote Entropy, pseudo-scientific works which have been debunked by this review's editors.

"It was," one Berkeley physicist said, "like seeing your car suddenly jump on the roof. It was that unexpected and stunning."

. . . Even if it [works], given society's dismal record in managing technology, the prospect of cheap, inexhaustible power from fusion is "like giving a machine gun to an idiot child," Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich says.

Laments Washington-based author-activist Jeremy Rifkin, "It's the worst thing that could happen to our planet."

Inexhaustible power, he argues, only gives man an infinite ability to exhaust the planet's resources, to destroy its fragile balance and create unimaginable human and industrial waste.

Stanford's Paul Ehrlich says he has no problem with the notion of cheap, clean, inexhaustible power per se, which could be a tremendous boon to mankind.

The problem: Industrialized societies, so far, have not used power wisely. The world's limited supply of fossil fuels is rapidly vanishing up smokestacks and out tail pipes. Rifkin cites a 1985 University of New Hampshire study showing that 88% of the Earth's oil and gas reserves will be depleted by 2025.

And even if fusion turns out as well as it has been promoted, Ehrlich says, it won't be a panacea. Most problems in the Third World, for example, are social, political, or economic, not technological, he says. "The idea that

you can solve the human dilemma with a single technological breakthrough is incorrect."

The current unqualified euphoria for fusion also concerns Barry Commoner, director of the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems at Queens College in New York.

He argues that fusion power could prove to be a dangerous distraction from existing energy sources. It does not make sense, he says, to jump on an unproven, possibly dangerous technology like fusion when a safe, proven, and decentralized technology like solar power is there for the asking.

Since fusion "does not yet exist," Commoner says, "it would be foolish to design a transition based on the assumption that it will exist. It's like starting to build a bridge over a river without knowing where the other side is."

To those people old enough to have been present for the original debates on nuclear fission, the unbridled enthusiasm for fusion power sounds strangely familiar.

In 1946, Holdren says, a famous physicist named Arnold Sommerfeld predicted that with the development of nuclear energy, "electricity would be too cheap to meter" and nuclear energy would abolish poverty from the face of the Earth by 1960. "They always oversell," Laura Nader says. It is only much later that you hear about the downside.

Quick-fix hopes

To Rifkin and Ehrlich, this is the real danger of fusion power—it gives people the false hope that a technological quick fix to the world's problems is just over the horizon. "Fusion power is an expedient short-lived diversion to the real problem," Rifkin says. "It gives some people the false hope that there are no limits to growth and no environmental price to be paid by having unlimited sources of energy."

But in thermodynamics, which is to say in real life, there's no such thing as a free lunch. "Even if one component is cheap," Rifkin says, "you pay the price somewhere else."

the matter as it stands now?

Fleischmann: I think people should try to verify the main point which we made, namely that there is an anomalous release of heat. I think they should not be going around looking for neutrons, which I think are a side issue, and for which we have ourselves got theories, you know. But I think it is a side issue. They should attack the main problem, which is the energy release. And I have nothing to say to people, who say they cannot find neutrons. Under many situations

we cannot find neutrons either. Just as well, as [otherwise] we would be dead! [Laughter.]

EIR: So you are quite alive and happy, and looking forward to developing some new ideas?

Fleischmann: I'm fit and ready to attack the problem anew.

EIR: I wish you good luck.

Fleischmann: Thank you for your interest.