
Interview: Edouard Parker

Denial of technological progress amounts to outright genocide

Mr. Parker was technical adviser on nuclear questions to five French research ministers, and is today chairman of an international economic consulting group, XA-EP. XA-EP manages a "future scenario" computer bank which covers over 40 countries. This interview was translated from the French magazine Fusion.

Fusion: What do you see as the desirable future of nuclear power in Europe?

Parker: The first thing we French should try to get is a common market for electricity. Let me explain: The British are lucky enough to have oil deposits, the Germans have coal, and we French are fortunate enough to have a nuclear "deposit." Nuclear-origin electricity has allowed us to save the equivalent of 60 million tons of petrol, which we did not have to buy. When the plants being built now are finished, we will be able to save the equivalent of 100 million tons of petrol. In other words, the French nuclear "deposit" is almost equal to that of the British petrol in the North Sea, or to that of an average oil-producing country, like half a Kuwait. Nuclear power is the tiger in the tank of the French economy.

When one is fortunate enough to have such economic wealth, one should export it. In 1987, we sold \$1 billion worth of electricity abroad. We could easily go up to \$2, \$3, or even \$4 billion.

There is a kilowatt-hour stock exchange, just like the oil spot market in Amsterdam. EDF [the state electricity company Electricité de France] has taken steps toward having the European Community set up a common energy market which would include free circulation of kilowatt-hours. After all, there is no reason why the future market of 1993 should be free for coal and closed for kilowatt-hours. . . . My wish is to see us fully use our nuclear capacity and export it massively.

You know about the results of the latest nuclear referendum in Italy: That country will virtually have to give up nuclear energy, because of the panic spread by the Greens and the anti-nuclear lobby, which are massively financed in Italy by Libya and Algeria, both of whom sell petrol to Italy. The Italians I know are panicked by the idea of being completely dependent on the Libyans and the Algerians for their energy supplies. They definitely want to diversify their foreign pur-

chases of energy and there is a whole lobby, especially in the north of Italy, that would like to buy our nuclear power.

I was recently interviewed by Radio Suisse-Romande: The journalist started telling me, in effect, that I was against the Greens. I answered that on the contrary I was all for the development of Green movements in Switzerland, for example. After a green campaign that succeeded in scaring the population, Switzerland put off the decision about building two nuclear plants. I told the journalist that this fact made me very happy: It meant we would build two more in France and sell them the electricity—and they would pay for it in strong Swiss francs. It will create skilled jobs in France and bring in foreign currency!

It's a matter of playing off the scenario used by oil and coal producers, who spread scare campaigns about nuclear energy in order to sell a little more coal or oil. Of course, when I push these arguments to the limit, it's mainly for pedagogical reasons. I want to expose how the great nuclear fear is mainly a coverup for economic and rumor warfare. I am trying to wake our neighbors up.

Fusion: In the context of the single market for kilowatt-hours you propose, France would have to lift the restrictions on the nuclear program, and go back to building two or three power units a year.

Parker: First of all, I would like to take up the subject of the present nuclear over-capacity. We now have an over-capacity of about 5%. I feel that is much too little; all petrol facilities have an over-capacity of approximately 50%. The 5% is therefore not only not shocking, but insufficient. Indeed, no industrial plant should function at 95% of its capacities, because then the slightest problem means shortages. In all areas of human activity, you need an over-capacity of 10, 15, or even 20%; otherwise, you're courting shortages.

Another important point. Unemployment today is officially around 11%. In reality, it is higher if we count unregistered people, underemployment, etc. Our number one objective must be to give skilled work to the inactive population. Out of the official figure of 11%, we can consider that 3-4% is an incompressible minimum. So we have to reduce unemployment by 7-8%. Let us assume this result will be obtained in five years. Well, those new workers will need

energy and we can estimate that our industrial electricity consumption will increase by 8%. I brought up this issue with officials of EDF and came to the conclusion that solving unemployment in France, down to 3 or 4%, would use up the whole of our present over-capacity. We would end up with no margin, which is very, very dangerous. In other words, if we decide to reduce the nuclear program to next to nothing, as has just been done, with only one unit every two to three years, that means implicitly that we have given up trying to solve unemployment. If so, it should be said out loud. It means accepting the crisis as a *fait accompli*: accepting 11% unemployment *ad vitam eternam* [into life eternal]. It's totally unacceptable. I think we need a drastic political and social program for reducing unemployment within five years. But building a nuclear plant takes 10 years. So, from today on, we have to start building new nuclear plants, as over-capacity, to reduce unemployment.

If we wait until unemployment is solved, we won't have the necessary power when it's needed. My most pessimistic scenario for France, is the one that is being played out right now. It will lead us to a 15% unemployment rate by January 1993. Just extrapolate the curve—that means defeat. It means an economic June 1940.

Fusion: In your reasoning, you assume that jobs given to previously unemployed people are industrial jobs and not of the make-work type, like working in fast food stores or punching tickets on the thruway. You assume they are skilled jobs if they are high in energy consumption.

Parker: Absolutely. These are real jobs, for workers with a high added value. Not broom sweepers, but skilled workers, who operate robots, lathes, machine tools, etc. That requires energy. In France, our great advantage is that we have a nuclear "oilfield" of 100 million tons a year. We must exploit this asset. Although oil prices are low today, everyone knows this is part of a strategy to make oil competitive with nuclear and other sources of energy. If the world goes back to petrol, the prices will shoot up once again. We are dealing with a classical strategy of economic warfare. To dissuade countries from using nuclear energy, nothing is more effective than to act unpredictably and to offer spectacular price drops from time to time.

I remember clearly that from 1969 to 1972, the so-called top specialists came up with many reports assuring the government that petrol would be available forever for \$2 or \$2.50 [per barrel], and that the nuclear program should be cut back. We know what followed: two petrol shocks together with the emerging of the crisis and of unemployment. Had we not cut back our nuclear program, we would have begun 1973 in a much better position. Now we are making the same mistake all over again as in 1969-1970.

Fusion: This leads me to a question I wanted to raise with you: the two-tier society. Some thinkers say that by arti-

cially blocking technological development, we get to a point where a handful of highly skilled people are enough to maintain existing infrastructure.

Parker: First of all, people must realize that their standard of living is directly linked to high value-added technological activities. In France, even the least skilled worker earns the minimum wage. The minimum wage plus social insurance contributions corresponds to an hourly cost which is 10 times greater than in Bangkok. How is it that a sweeper is worth 10 times more in Paris than in Bangkok? What makes the difference? It is because we have high value-added activities like the nuclear, space, electronic, robotic, and automobile sectors. The only reason low-skilled jobs in France earn more than in Thailand, is technology, and the nuclear sector.

I am all for nuclear power and for space research, not because of fanaticism, but because I do not want to see my fellow countrymen reduced to the living standards of the Third World.

I attended a colloquium on technological risks last year. We spent three days discussing petrol, railroad accidents, planes that crash, platforms that burn, etc. At the end, I was burning with impatience, because I wanted to tell those people: "Let's speak about the main risk, the risk of zero technology, because that one is real!" Since I couldn't get my word in, I wrote a book on the risk of no technology [*La bombe à neutrons, désinformations en chaîne*, PUF, 1988].

Take the case of Tanzania, a country with zero technology. Its population has stopped growing. Cholera has come back with a vengeance, all the traditional epidemics are out of control because of a lack of healthcare personnel. It is a total return to the natural state, to the pure ecological state, in other words, to a complete catastrophe. A company that goes to Tanzania is undertaking a veritable expedition; it has to take its own water, toothpaste, soap, toilet paper, vaccinations, food. . . . Our greenies who go there in 4 × 4 Rovers with all their material find what they're looking for: They find all the most dangerous species of mosquitoes! But I wish a better future to my fellow-countrymen.

Take the case of India, which is living through a disaster. The arable land-area per inhabitant was 0.5 hectares in 1950; it is headed down to 0.15 for the year 2000. We are literally moving towards a scenario of Sahelization. The most important problem in India is the deforestation of villages by the women and children who live there. Once deforestation has taken place, it sets off a vicious cycle. India's main problem is energy: They need irrigation, and therefore need to pump the water; they need to produce fertilizers and especially, to replace wood by another energy source. As the Indians have little coal and petrol, they are ferociously pro-nuclear. With everyone repeating that we have to help the Third World, it would be crazy for us to give up our nuclear techniques which the Third World needs so sorely. I think the West would help India more by sending them a nuclear power plant than Mother Theresa!