

S O S

by Eduardo Galeano
Patria Grande; September 17, 2002
[Translated by Francisco González]

Who gets the water? The monkey with the stick does. The unarmed monkey dies of thirst. This prehistory lesson opens the film "2001: A Space Odyssey". Now, for the 2003 odyssey, President Bush announces a military budget of one billion dollars a day. The arms industry is the only sure investment: some arguments are irrefutable, whether at the upcoming Earth Summit in Johannesburg or at any other international conference.

- The powerful nations that own the planet are in the habit of reasoning by means of bombardments. They constitute power--a genetically modified power, a gigantic Frankenpower that humiliates nature: It exercises its freedom to turn air into filth, and its right to leave humanity homeless; it refers to its horrors as errors; it crushes whomever stands in its way; it is deaf to all alarms and it breaks everything it touches.

- The oceans are raising, and the low lands are forever buried under water. This may sound like a metaphor for economic development as it stands now, but what it actually describes is a picture of the world as it will be in a none too distant future, according to the scientists consulted by the United Nations.

- For more than two decades, the predictions of ecologists were met with either mockery or silence. Nowadays, scientists concede they are right. And on June 3, 2002, even President Bush was forced to admit, for the first time, that disasters will occur if global warming continues damaging the planet. Journalist Bill McKibben has commented that the Vatican now also acknowledges that Galileo was not wrong. But nobody is perfect: At the same time, Bush announced that, in the next 18 years, the United States will increase the emissions of toxic gases by 43 per cent. After all, he presides over a country of machines that roll along eating petroleum and vomiting poison. At the end of last year, Bush made an appeal to solidarity, and he was able to define it: "Let your children wash the neighbor's car."

- The energy policy of the world's leading country is dictated by earthly business that claims to obey the high heavens. The late Enron Corporation (deceased by fraud), which was the main consulting firm for the government and the chief financier of Bush's and most senators' campaigns, used to issue divine messages. Its CEO, Kenneth Lay, used to say: "I believe in God and I believe in the market." Its previous leader had a similar motto: "We are on the side of angels."

- The United States engages in environmental terrorism with complete remorselessness, as if God had granted that country an impunity voucher because it has stopped smoking.

- "Nature is already very worn out," wrote the Spanish friar Luis Alfonso de Carvalho. He wrote this in 1695. If he could only see us now!

- A great part of the surface of Spain is losing its soil. The soil moves away, and sooner rather than later sand will move in through the window cracks. Only 15 per cent of the Mediterranean forests remain standing. A century ago, forests covered half of Ethiopia, which is now a vast desert. The Amazonian region of Brazil has lost forests the size of France. At the rate we are going, Central America will soon start counting its trees the way a bald man counts his few remaining strands of hair.

- Erosion drives Mexican peasants away from the countryside and from the country. The more the soil is degraded, the larger the amount of fertilizers and pesticides that are needed. According to the World Health Organization, these chemical aids kill three million farmers every year.

- As human tongues and human cultures die away, so do plants and animals. According to biologist Edward O Wilson, species disappear at the rate of three per hour. And not only because of deforestation and pollution: large-scale production, export-oriented agriculture and the standardization of consumer products are eliminating diversity. It is hard to believe that barely a century ago there were more than 500 varieties of lettuce and 287 kinds of carrots in the world. And 220 varieties of potatoes in Bolivia alone.

- Forests are scalped, the land turns into a desert, rivers are poisoned, the polar ice caps and the snow of mountain peaks are melting away. In many places the rains have stopped completely, while in others it rains as if the sky was falling. The world's climate has become insane.

- Floods, droughts, cyclones, uncontrollable fires--they are all becoming increasingly less natural, although the media insists, against all evidence, on describing them as such. And the fact that the United Nations named the 1990's as the "International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters" sounds like some kind of morbid joke. ¿Reduction? That was the most disastrous decade of all. There were 86 catastrophic events that left more people dead than the very deadly wars that took place during the same period. Almost all of the dead (96% to be precise) were in the poor countries, the ones that the experts insist on calling "developing nations".

- With devotion, with enthusiasm, the South imitates and exacerbates the worst practices of the North. And the North does not export its virtues, but rather its worst faults, so the poor countries adopt the American veneration for the automobile and the associated scorn of public transportation, as well as all the mythology of free markets and consumer society. The South also receives with open arms the filthiest factories, the most detrimental to nature, in exchange for salaries that make slavery seem rather appealing in comparison.

- And yet the North consumes, on average, ten times more petroleum, gas and charcoal per person than the South, where only one in 100 people own an automobile. A charting of environmental feasting vs. fasting practices shows that 75% of the world's pollution is caused by 25% of its population. This minority does not include, of course, the two hundred million who live without drinking water, or the hundred million who go to sleep every night with an empty stomach. It is not "humanity" that is responsible for gobbling up the natural resources, or for laying waste to the air, the soil and the water.

- Power merely shrugs its shoulders: When this planet stops being profitable, I'll move to another one.

- Beauty is beautiful only if it can be sold, and justice is just only if it can be bought. The planet is being murdered by the way of life we are supposed to emulate, just as we are paralyzed by machines invented to expedite movement, and we are isolated by cities created for assemblage.

- Words lose their sense, as the green sea and the blue sky--painted by the courtesy of algae that have produced oxygen for millions of years--lose their color

- Those points of light that shine at night--are they spying on us? The stars twinkle with astonishment and fear. They can't manage to understand how this world of ours, still alive, continues to turn round and round, working so feverishly on its own annihilation. And sheer fright causes them to flicker when they see that this world is already invading other celestial bodies..