[An] Elementary Algebra of Common Goods and Evils

by Ferruccio Gambino

(Translated by George Caffentzis)*

1. Capitalism has used an elementary algebra of common goods and evils even before understanding and conceptualizing the meaning of common goods and evils. Once upon a time it used to be said that capital is for the socialization of losses and the privatization of profits. However, in some sectors, multiple advantages – of both profit and rent - are joined together in a perverse way with commonized evils. The nuclear sector provides an especially clear example of this phenomenon.

1.1 Water, wind, air and quite a few other elements of this planet, where 350 seismic tremors a day are recorded, are common goods as long as they are not polluted. When they are polluted, the goods leave a trail of remarkable disadvantages to all living creatures, and therefore become common evils. In order to become again common goods, the different polluted elements have to be “de”polluted, if it is possible. Only if and when they are reclaimed is it possible to turn them into common goods again. Water in general is a common good, but radioactive water released from a nuclear reactor after a meltdown is not any longer a common good, it is a common disaster, an evil coercively commonized and as such it is imposed upon society. Public and private authorities discharge damage on the entire surrounding population in an indeterminate (and often indeterminable) range with such a damaged plant.

1.2 Within the spectrum of industrial activity, the transformation of common goods into common evils [] is most evident in the case of nuclear power. Contrary to other sectors, the birth and expansion of the nuclear military was financed by state’s treasury, most especially in the US, but also in the USSR and other countries since the end of the 1930s (and for a long time) mainly for war purposes. Although the physicist Enrico Fermi was then of the opinion that nuclear energy is a wonderful new form of energy, even in the 1940s it should have been possible to ask why the push to develop it was above all the race to create the absolute weapon.

Following the war, however, nuclear power was sold to the public as energy with a peaceful end. It should be noted that for many reasons in the US the government was not and is not the direct financer of civilian nuclear plants; they are privately financed. However, the state protected investors in nuclear power plants with a crazy law that put a limit on the insurance costs of these plants in case of accidents and disasters. Nuclear reactors were government funded in the final instance, since this private liability limit was a small fraction of the eventual damage claims a serious accident at a nuclear plant would generate.

It is a fact that the danger and consequent fears of the “peaceful” atom have given popular legitimacy to the militarization – both in the public and private realms – of the entire atomic sector in all nuclear nations. There is much to say about this subject, but I will limit my remarks to a few observations.

1.3 Since the first decades of the “nuclear era,” the construction and running of nuclear plants in most countries has depended upon public funds and financing. Private capital has played a marginal role, providing almost homeopathic doses of cash, but private capital has been destined to sneak in, to have a managerial role in the plants and to profit from this role, with the consumers footing the bill. In the case of nuclear disasters, private capitalists are protected by a double armor: on the one side, the public treasury is the creditor of last resort and, on the other, the payment with public funds for the evacuations, the hospital bills and in the end the clean up of the nuclear waste. In other words, the private management of nuclear power has been subjecting large populations to blackmail under a continual, though muffled, reign of terror, while obtaining tax money from the public treasury with the excuse of dealing with emergencies.

1.4 The expense of maintaining and decommissioning the plants and the custody of the radioactive waste for thousands of years impose[] a tremendous tax and pollution burden on the population. In any case, the population is condemned to pay a tribute of blood and labor to the Minotaur for thousands of years. Sometimes, in a kind of endemic complicity, the state attempts and often succeeds in corrupting an overseas regime to bury the more dangerous waste on its coasts. It is an open secret that in the course of time the storage places that are filled with radioactive waste wrapped up in ridiculous barrels of cement are no better protected than if they were wrapped in velum. No one really knows what to do with nuclear waste and no one will remember how to dispose of it in the arc of the thousands of years that are necessary for it to be “de”-toxified.

1.5 There are about 627 nuclear power plants in the world that are producing electrical energy at the beginning of this second decade of the 21st century. Some of these plants have been damaged just years after their construction. In the longer period, there is the probability of the desertification of whole territories for thousands of square miles around damaged plants and not for years but for centuries. The consequences that would befall any large area in the case of a new nuclear program would be likewise: the creation of unapproachable deserts for a duration measured in biblical time.

1.6 In countries that are densely populated (such as Italy and Japan) the noxiousness to the environment of a damaged plant appears in two modes: in the first place, the radiation that effects the population in general and which generates serious illnesses from cancers to birth defects in a radius of thousands of square miles around the nuclear site—though still far from where the media personalities and the haute bourgeoisie live—in the second place, at a closer distance, the radioactivity that directly affects the workers in the plant. In both cases, it appears that space and distance is what determines the distribution of harm. In reality, however, this distribution follows from the criteria of the separation of classes and the position within a class and gender structure.

1.6.1. In the case of workers’ labor after a typical nuclear accident like the one at the Fukushima plant run by Tepco (Tokyo Electric Power Company) in the Spring of 2011, the division is starkly revealed between the few long-term workers paid directly by Tepco and the many precarious workers--considered unskilled and receiving the lowest wages--who are attached to contractors and a cascade of sub-contractors and who are to take care of the maintenance of the three

stricken reactors at Fukushima as well as the other 52 nuclear reactors in 18 sites around Japan. The precarious workers constitute 88% of the 83,000 workers in the Japanese nuclear sector (with 73,000 precarious workers, to be more precise). At Fukushima, in the twelve months that preceded the nuclear disaster 89% of the
10, 303 workers had been placed in various steps in the wage ladder of the sub-contractors, with the salary and the danger increasing with the increase in the exposure to radioactivity. After the disaster, they faced the challenge of unsustainable levels of exposure of radiation while they cleaned the spent-fuel pools with mops and rags in order to open up a path for the inspectors and the technicians of Tepco. They had to work in intense cold in order the fill up trash cans with contaminated refuse.

As always in work that is very noxious, the recruitment always seems to take place in random settings: in rundown construction yards that have experienced a long period of crisis and seen much unemployment, among local poor rural workers and in labor gangs organized by local gangsters. Always and everywhere the precarious workers in nuclear sites are intended to hide the wounds and contusions they receive on the job, under penalty of immediate firing. After the disaster at Fukushima, the precarious workers were offered higher wages due to the general fear of radioactivity: about $350 a day for two hours of work; that is more than double of the preceding pay when the working day was longer. That is to say, they receive the wages of fear. The conditions of work were generally better during the 1990s when the exposure to radioactivity had decreased since the 1980s, but later the exposure began increasing again due to the increase of accidents in the obsolete plants, in spite of shorter work schedules.

In fact, the group of people sacrificed to radioactivity has not faded away; on the contrary, the sacrifice of human lives has become systemic: from each the absorption of his modicum of radiation, to each the loss of his job once the early symptoms of disease are detected (“his” since most of these workers are men). In short, it is a case of nuclear socialism.

[In Japan] the first trade union of precarious workers in the nuclear energy area was founded in the 1980s to contest this state of affairs with a platform of claims, conspicuous among which was the one concerning putting a stop to both fake data on the exposure to radiation and to the strict orders given to the workers to lie to the inspectors about how security procedures were being sidestepped. After the first 180 workers had signed up for the union, in democratic Japan, anonymous thugs smashed the doors of the apartments where union officials were staying and threatened them and their families. Clearly, nuclear power shapes democracy (not the other way around!) In brief, one needs to be quiet because, as they say in union circles, “when one enters a nuclear site, all is secret.”

1.7 Elaborated in the 1940s and 1950s in the military world, the paradigm of nuclear labor was constituted as a general paradigm of a tripartite division patterned on that of the armed forces: in the first and highest rung, the scientists, planners, and strategists, invisible in their Olympus but not totally secure; in the second rung, inspectors, technicians, and programmers with their stable jobs but also with a bit more exposure to dangerous radioactive materials; on the bottom rung, the precarious “service” workers, who constitute the “base force,” as they say in the navy. This scheme has been applied to an increasing number of workplace situations from the dockworkers of the US’s West Coast in the 1950s —separated in three rungs: the A-men, the B-

men and the rest—to the contemporary plague of casual work that has hit and continues to hit stratum after stratum of workers in all the world.

Everyone manages exactly the danger that emanates from their jobs. The management of fear and illness is a private and solitary affair, thanks to the casual collection and secrecy of sensitive data in the health statistics kept by the power companies, at least until the affected people organize themselves, as they have begun to do in the US.

1.8 Nuclear power plants require a nuclear state. The nuclear state can even have a patina of democracy, in the sense that it permits regular elections where one votes to choose in whom the executive power will be vested. In reality, however, one votes only in order to show that one is "de-voted"[to regimentation]. To be a voter is the inevitable deceit in the nuclear state. [Morevover, the nuclear state cannot permit any discontinuity in the discipline of the population and in the regular flow of lies], whatever the list of candidates that win the elections.

1.9 The absence of reliable information is one of the characteristic traits of the nuclear state. It was and is a great forge of falsehood in both East and West. The nuclear state's repression of information and plain fraud is far greater than the diplomatic lies that Wikileaks has so well documented in 2011. This secrecy is an instrument of the perverse solidarity of the nuclear ruling class, it is part of their complicity with the narco-information given to the population which is expected to submit passively and live in a no man's land, where nuclearization is a state of enclosure promoted by state power and legalized and enforced by the monsters of so-called "governance."

*Translator's Note: The above article was written by Ferruccio Gambino, a sociologist at the Univesity of Padova, in May 2011 during a campaign to pass a national referendum resolution barring the construction of new nuclear power plants in Italy, as the Berlesconi government had planned. Italy is not now a nuclear state, since it does not have any operational nuclear power plants on its territory and its military does not claim to have nuclear weapons. (Although this nuclear-free status cannot be applied to the US and NATO air and naval bases on Italy's soil.) Thus, the referendum resolution was intended to stop Italy from becoming a nuclear state. The anti-nuke resolution passed by a wide margin. The author expresses his thanks to Hiroko Tabuchi who wrote "Less Pay, Fewer Benefits, More Radiation," International Herald Tribune, April 11, 2011, p. 1, 6.