

Reading the signs

Christine Clegg

Gordon Burn, *Happy Like Murderers*, Faber and Faber, £17.99

Among other things, Gordon Burn has a gift for ventriloquism. The ability to catch and replay the speech patterns and texture of the language of his subjects is something that sets his books about murderers apart from the rest of the 'true crime' genre. But even while he is respected for the thoroughness of his research - the scrupulous checking of facts and information - his willingness to move in so closely raises troubling questions about identification. In his earlier book, *Somebody's Husband, Somebody's Son: The Story of Peter Sutcliffe* (Mandarin 1984), Burn's ear for the language of John Sutcliffe, the father of Peter Sutcliffe, sometimes makes it difficult to see quite where Burn stands. Nicole Ward Jouve, in her analysis of the Sutcliffe case (*The Streetcleaner: The Yorkshire Ripper Case on Trial*, Marion Boyars, 1986), observes that Burn's ... 'unquestioning use of John Sutcliffe's own language makes him sound like an "adoptive son"'. That same grasp of spoken language (this time, the hybrid dialect of urban and rural Gloucestershire) is powerfully present in Burn's new book about Fred and Rose West, *Happy Like Murderers*. But there is never any question here about where Burn stands, especially in relation to Fred West. In conjunction with the cadences of the spoken lives, the narrative forcefully articulates the sense of a 'moral void' at the 'heart' of the Wests. More than just mapping out an absence, though, Burn finds a way of dwelling inside the terrible home ground of the Wests, and at the same time speaking from an ethical position.

Nevertheless, the question of authorial identification remains fraught because it risks installing readers in the lived psychodrama of the Wests. This fear of coming too close to a degraded reality has always been one of the major difficulties with the West case, ever since the news of the horrible discoveries at 25 Cromwell Street appeared in 1994. On the one hand, the newspapers

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appeared to be saturated with coverage of the story throughout the digging up of evidence in the form of human remains, the suicide of Fred West, the eventual trial and conviction of Rose West, and, finally, the release of biographical details about the young women who were abducted, tortured, murdered and mutilated. But it was equally obvious, both from the reluctance of the BBC to reveal some of the evidence given in the trial (as being too horrible to hear), and from the absence of serious analysis in the quality press, that there was something unmanageable about the Wests and their crimes. The media representation of Rose West, and the rhetoric of perverse femininity which, not surprisingly, linked her with Myra Hindley, gave rise to discussions in feminist publications about the idea of female serial killers. The usual charges of sensationalism against the media were oddly misplaced, though, because the crimes were so grotesquely excessive, and since the question of the extent of Rose West's culpability remains unresolved. Indeed, what Burn draws attention to is that it is virtually impossible to exaggerate the horror given that the Wests appear to have broken every taboo the law attempts to enshrine, including incest, child murder, and mutilation.

In his review of *Happy Like Murderers* (*Guardian* 26.9.98), Andy Beckett describes Burn as 'the perfect coffee table ghoul'. Whilst appearing to cast doubt on the moral purpose of the book, Beckett concedes that it contains a 'moral core' - the careful registration of the neglect of the outside world in the face of the West's activities. I would agree that this is crucial to an understanding of Burn's mission. One of the central arguments of *Happy Like Murderers* turns on the failure of the 'outside world' to intervene. Moreover, this failure to act represents a cultural illiteracy - a failure of interpretation, an inability to read the conglomeration of signs and codes. Dope is a recurrent theme here, serving as a timely distraction both to the police, who were continually raiding the West house for drugs, and to the 'floaters and drifters', the stoned lodgers who were switched off to the violence and routine sexual brutality in the 'safe' house at the end of the urban hippy trail. Similarly, throughout the lengthy Yorkshire ripper investigations, the police were switched off, albeit for different reasons, to the remarkably obvious signs that linked Peter Sutcliffe with the sexual murders of women in the North of England between 1975 and 1981. They failed to read the evidence that stared up at them from the ground - the boot-print, the tyre-print. As Nicole Ward Jouve comments in her analysis of the case, the signs were 'there for all to see but invisible because

so blatant'. It is such blatancy that marks the history of the Wests at every turn. Burn confronts us with the confusions about criminal templates - conscious and unconscious - that persist in culture. What does a criminal look like, act like? How can we tell where the harm will come from? Not everything is known about the West murders. But the connections between evidence of disappearances, abused children, pornography and prostitution, as well as the criminal records for rape, indecent assault, and actual bodily harm, added up to something significantly amiss in the West household.

Tangential to the contemporary mood of sexual liberation, but not of it since liberation suggests resistance to prohibitions, every aspect of the West family life was sexualised. As children, both Fred and Rose experienced the sexualisation of everyday life in which the only imperative - the law handed down - was that father has his way. Fathers are *entitled* to sex with whoever they want. Not the incest taboo as the symbolic means of entry into culture, but incest as 'nature's way' of enforcing real father rights on children - 'Dads know how to do it right', Fred tells his children (p120). At the same time, and in contrast to the incestuous insularity, there is exchange with the world outside. Fred, as husband, and father, is willing to hand 'his women' over, on the provision that he gets to look and to listen. Since the primacy of the black man's penis is the object of Fred's desire through Rose, black men never have to pay for sex. Payment comes in the form of the 'donation' of semen to Rose which creates 'love children' and foments Fred's sexual potency. Burn exhaustively demonstrates that living out Fred's desires was a full-time job for Rose. Fred was also consumed by working on their home at Cromwell Street. The building, rebuilding, constructing, levelling, and reconstructing was continuous - a life project with no planning permissions. Fred West's home was a permanent building site - building for the sake of building, killing for the sake of killing. His fixation with bits and pieces of machinery, scrap, tools and junk, which in itself is already a perversion of benign means of making-do and mending, is discharged into the dead bodies of murdered girls and women, and engineers the sexual persecution of his children. Not just father's right to everyday sexual activity and torment, but father's right to rig up dirty old metal contraptions in and around the bodies of his living, breathing children.

If the anarchic hatred of authority and officialdom kept Fred West just outside the law - mostly, he got away with things - the Wests as 'family' were

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just about attached through the children to the social fabric of schools, hospitals, health visitors and so on. Retrospectively, it is easy to say that people should have known, should have acted, should have intervened, should have read the signs, but it is also fair to say that the kinds of institutional structures and practices that have been implemented in the wake of the scandals of Cleveland, for instance, were simply not in place at the time the Wests were operating. In this sense they are both symptom and evidence of the failure to protect children from bad parents, whether real or surrogate. There is, of course, the matter of Rose's sexual enslavement to Fred, but the question of her own desires remains complicated. Officially, Rose was a minor when she 'took up' with Fred. The children's enslavement is another matter. Burn gives due and proper emphasis to the murdered victims of the Wests, but he also, rightly, does justice to the terrible suffering of the West children who survived. They were continuously subjected to cruelties and deprivation in a pornographic atmosphere of sexualised activities, gestures and speech, in a place where everything came back to sex or death. Testament to this is the ritualised recording for posterity - the photographing, the cremating and, lastly, the bottling - of Rose's (black) semen stained black knickers.

For Andy Beckett, the Wests are, in the end, 'too unique'. Implicitly, this means that they are so exceptional, such a deviation, that we can learn nothing from them. Whilst Burn is scrupulous about not making bold claims, he resists the temptation to remove them from other ways of interpreting and understanding the cultures we inhabit. By introducing the book with a reconstruction of the life of Caroline Raine, the young woman who, uncannily, escaped twice from the Wests and eventually brought charges of indecent assault and actual bodily harm against them, Burn powerfully conveys the sense of the violent interruption to the lives of the young women who were murdered. The circular effect of the narrative works to emphasise the unfolding and escalating horror as figures disappear suddenly from the (textual) landscape. This circularity also cuts up and disperses the otherwise relentless pornography of the serial sexual violence of the Wests. But the stylistic device of reworking the same sentiment can start to feel like an intrusive repetition that the narrative could well do without.

If the figure of Caroline Raine comes to stand in for those others who cannot be represented, the patient exploration of her early life enables Burn to track

the innumerable harms and cruelties, deliberate and circumstantial, that adults inflict on children. Caroline discovers years later, for instance, that her stepfather had intercepted all the cards, letters and small gifts of money sent to her by her real father when she moved with her mother to the Forest of Dean. This does not mean that we can, in a simplistic way, put the Wests at the extreme end of a continuum of family dysfunction and parental abuse; but neither can we obliterate them from the bounds of understanding, even if they were, in Beckett's words, 'beyond morals'.

Although *Happy Like Murderers* manages the difficult task of maintaining enough distance for the reader to approach the 'moral vacuum' of the Wests, the author's antipathy towards Fred West is palpable. In one sense it drives the narrative. For all Fred West's 'bullshitting' and ridiculous posturing, he *was* able to go about doing what he wanted to women and children, unimpeded by the laws to which most of human society is subject. And it is here that the ethical moment of the book can be precisely located, I think, in Burn's attempt - too late for the victims - to read the signs of dereliction in that bleak place where the cultural prohibitions - the laws of human society - failed so abysmally.

Slumbering in the lap of social labour

David Goldblatt

Lester R. Brown, Christopher Flavin and Hilary French (eds), *State of the World*, Earthscan, £12.95

Marx was right about the magnitude of the forces - both destructive and creative • unleashed by capitalism. Reading State of the World has led David Goldblatt to reflect on the sheer scale of the environmental degradation this has led to.

One hundred and fifty years after the publication of the Communist Manifesto it is clear to almost everyone that the old boy was wrong about almost everything. He was wrong about the environmental consequences of capitalism, and particularly wrong about the harmonious potential of socialism's relationship with the natural world.

But no wonder - Marx and the social changes he described were of their moment. And what a moment it was: after thousands of years of painfully slow economic development, the growth of capitalism seemed to mean that humanity was on the verge of escape.

The reality of agrarian societies had been widespread, grinding poverty. The fabulous wealth of ancient elites had been extracted from minuscule economies. Wretchedly poor peasantries had battled the vagaries of an unconquered and spiteful nature. The growth of pre-modern economies was always constrained by social forces and by natural limits. Now, at last, the unbridled energies and technologies of industrial capitalism would transcend the limits of agrarian economics. Fossil fuels and machines were replacing human and animal muscles as sources of energy and work. Inorganic materials were replacing scarce and depleted natural resources. Markets, capital and capitalists, unfettered by political and social restraints, would finally force the natural world to yield its potential riches.

Of course, the environmental consequences of this breakout were becoming

apparent in the filth and smoke of the early industrial city. But, like the miserable poverty of the new working class, this was a mere problem of transition. With the inevitable arrival of socialism and the dissolution of the capitalist mode of production, poverty and pollution would be banished. As we know, it hasn't quite worked out that way.

Industrial capitalism has lifted perhaps one quarter of humanity out of poverty and raised them to dizzying heights of prosperity, while the rest of the planet continues to live either near, on, or beyond, the margins of survival. Nature has yielded its riches to some, but the degradation and pollution that Engels found in Manchester has proved far from transitional. In fact, the environmental consequences of capitalist development have multiplied in scope, scale, complexity and danger. As for the harmonious reunion of humanity and environment under socialism, it perished long ago in the toxic wastelands of Siberia and the macabre mutilated forests of Bohemia and Silesia.

Yet rereading the Communist Manifesto today one cannot but be struck by Marx's profound grasp of the elemental dynamism of capitalism. Marx's enduring relevance is that he combined an appreciation of the sheer quantitative expansion of capitalist economies with a lucid sense of their broader structural consequences: their unparalleled capacity to transform the most ancient and deeply embedded patterns of economic, political and social life; the terrifying, vertiginous velocity they impart to economic and social change. Marx, writing at a moment of glorious industrial take-off and ecological ignorance, may have been oblivious to the systemic toxic payback of the new mode of production, but he was in no doubt about the exponential increase it brought in humanity's collective power to transform the earth. In this respect Marx was, and is, particularly correct.

The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and colossal productive forces than have all the preceding generations together. Subjection of nature's forces to man ... clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground - what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour.⁷

Had Engels a copy of *State of the World* to hand as he read over the manuscript,

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he might well have noted in the margin, 'You ain't seen nothing yet'.

On almost indicator you care to take - and *State of the World* has no shortage of them - the evidence is unambiguous. Forests are shrinking and deserts are expanding. Water tables are falling and greenhouse emissions are rising. Toxic and nuclear wastes accumulate in the environment, while soils are eroding. The planet is hotting up, the polar ice caps are fragile and species are being extinguished faster than we can count them. We are experiencing unprecedented levels of environmental degradation and there are no economic systems and ideologies left to blame, except for one.

Is this just another case of environmentalist crying wolf? After all the crude computer projections of doom produced by the Club of Rome in the 1970s have long since been discredited, and the relationship between economic and demographic growth and environmental degradation is not fixed. But, in the last twenty-five years, the profile of environmental degradation has been transformed. While the early depletionists worried about the exhaustion of fossil fuel supplies and local urban air pollution, we are now faced with the exhaustion of irreplaceable forest and global climatic change. The problem is not that we will be unable to find new oil deposits, but that we have burnt too much already. It may be that some Western economies have managed to squeeze a little more output from a little less raw material, and that the crudest indicators of air and water pollution have peaked in the West. But these benign developments have been swamped by the environmental consequences of two decades of explosive economic growth in East Asia and elsewhere in the developing world, and the recognition of a multiplicity of new forms of pollution and ecological stress: ozone depletion, global warming, etc. It is difficult not to conclude that, under current circumstances, the quantitative expansion of the global capitalist economy will lead to levels of natural resource loss and ecosystem disruption that will place constraints upon future economic development and pose threats to political stability, as great as those that were faced by the fragile agrarian societies of the pre-modern world. The closing numbers at the end of the twentieth century do not look good.

In 1850 the population of the planet had reached 1.2 billion people. There are now 5.8 billion of us and, although the exponential curve is beginning finally to flatten, there will be another 3.6 billion of us by 2050. In 1950 the crude value of global output stood at \$5 trillion. Between 1990 and 1997 the global

economy grew by another \$5 trillion to stand at a total value of \$29 trillion. In seven years we have managed to generate the same volume of growth as the entire human race managed from the emergence of the species until 1950. The mathematics of these of these growth rates is dizzying. Assuming an annual rate of global growth of only 4 per cent, output will more than double every twenty years. In 2050 the earth will be supporting 9.4 billion people and an economy whose annual production will be in the region of \$200 trillion. How much of the world's ecosystem will make it to 2050, and in what condition, are other matters.

In the last century the world had already lost more than half of its original forest cover, mostly in Europe and North America. In the closing decades of the twentieth century the insatiable demand for lumber and paper in the West, and for export dollars, new land and firewood in the developing world, has seen a third of what is left disappear. Satellite imagery shows the steady retreat of forest from the urban sprawl of breakneck urbanisation. Reckless deforestation, by poor peasants, corrupt governments and their corporate cronies, has brought about species loss, soil erosion, flooding on a spectacular scale and uncontrollable raging fires. While more marginal land is cleared for crop production, more water is drawn from unsustainable aquifers and river courses to irrigate it. Every year the great Colorado, Ganges and Yellow rivers that irrigate the vast farmlands of the Southwestern USA, Northern India and Eastern China, run dry for longer and longer. Yet the planet's grain stocks are falling, prices are inching up, and the politics of food, land and water scarcity appear on the near horizon.

The world's fisheries are already on that horizon. A quadrupling of the global fish catch in the last fifty years has left eleven of the world's fifteen major fisheries on the point of collapse. The signs of economic desperation and ecological crisis are clear. 69 per cent of the world's major fish species are in serious decline. And the carbon capitalism of the West and its remorseless global duplication has produced a quadrupling of fossil fuel burning in the last fifty years, and an even greater increase in greenhouse gas emission. We are now experiencing the fastest rate of atmospheric change for 10,000 years. The American-Arabian petro-chemical complex may consider it mere coincidence that the thirteen warmest years since planetary records of temperature began have all occurred since 1979; nobody else seems to.

Can it be that even the most Promethean and optimistic observer does not

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find these raw figures daunting? Can they ignore the fact that the US economy is currently responsible for a quarter of an already unsustainable global level of greenhouse emissions? Can they honestly believe that a global population of 9.4 billion people, all aspiring to a standard of living set by American and Western consumers, is a plausible future?

I, for one, am daunted by these figures and prospects. But the questions that they raise are even more daunting: how is that environmental issues continue to occupy, at best, a small part of the political agenda, in even the most amenable political cultures? What can feasibly be done to bring the environmental appetite of the global economy within the pale of sustainability? And who will do so, and what are their chances? The unsettling consequence of reading *State of the World* is that it forces one to pose these questions without providing much help in answering them.

What is then that keeps these most pressing of issues at some remove from the centres of political energy and power? In the 'developing' world the answer is simple - poverty. It is poverty and the perverse incentive systems of unregulated capitalism that fuel the unsustainable consumption of precious natural resources and ecosystems, by individuals, governments and corporations. Authoritarian polities do not help matters, not least because they make it so hard for environmentalists and local peoples to organise and protest. But, as India demonstrates, democratic politics is no guarantee of sustainable economic development. In any case, it is unthinkable for politicians and publics alike, with so many people denied access to the most basic of essential goods and services, let alone a measure of Western affluence, that economic growth should be curtailed, whatever the environmental consequences. This will not wash in the West. Despite the persistence of relative poverty and social exclusion, we have already bloated ourselves on more than our fair share of resources, and poisoned ourselves and everybody else with more than our fair share of environmental problems. It is clear then, for reasons of both justice and realpolitik, that any meaningful response to global environmental problems must begin in the West.

Are there reasons for optimism? It could be argued that western economic development has created favourable conditions for the emergence of environmental politics. Affluence, security, liberal democracy and widespread higher education appear to be important preconditions for the emergence of

contemporary environmental movements. One can overlay the argument that the environment is marginal in the public and political cultures of the West. Survey after survey reports people's desire for a cleaner environment and some willingness to pay for it. Membership of and donations to environmental NGOs are healthy. Corporate reports pay homage to environmental impact assessments and sustainable mission statements. From almost nowhere in the last thirty years every polity in the OECD has acquired a comprehensive body of environmental legislation, and enforcement agencies. While the progress of explicitly environmental parties has been, at best, limited, most mainstream political parties have been forced by public pressure to adopt environmental policies, however insincere or partial. These are important achievements. Yet when measured against the scale of the threats facing us, they appear insubstantial.

When it comes to the crunch, the greening of our political cultures and institutions evaporates. In no national election - with perhaps the exception of the Swedish debate over nuclear power - has the environment figured as the central concern of politicians or electorates. In no nation has an economic policy been elaborated or implemented, in government, in which the environmental consequences of unchecked economic growth has occupied more than a secondary status. In the major economies of the world this task has barely acquired any status at all. No project of international environmental concern or institution building has been graced with even a fraction of the political energy and resources devoted to the creation of an international free trading order, the creation of a single European currency, or the stabilisation of bankrupt financial systems and their authoritarian rulers.

Perhaps the most important reason that so little has been done is that the individual and collective consequences of turning unsustainable growth into sustainable development are so enormous. Paradoxically, the more clearly defined and reasoned the environmentalist response becomes - *and State of the World* provides just such a response - the more improbable its likely implementation appears. A global demographic, industrial and agricultural revolution must be combined with a vast global transfer of environmentally benign capital and technology from the West to the rest. All of this must be achieved in a time scale of perhaps half a century and it must be done against the current grain of pricing structures, subsidies, incentives, and profit opportunities around which the global economy currently spins.

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Extraordinarily, the policy package that might initiate such a process is not entirely Utopian. Global flows of capital and technology are already immense, while the influence of international environmental law and institutions is unprecedentedly large. It is not inconceivable that a global historical compromise could be negotiated between them; Western capital could be directed towards profitable but environmentally beneficial infrastructure development in the South; the terms of trade in international agricultural markets could be made to reflect the environmental costs of production. A range of energy and material efficient technologies exist that would, if widely distributed, make a considerable impact on the West's environmental appetite. If the World Bank diverted into diffusing these technologies and practices in the developing world a modicum of the time and energy which it currently devotes to funding environmentally disastrous dams and reclamation schemes, we might begin to pull back from the brink. An environmental overhaul of the currently insane taxation and subsidy system of advanced and developing capitalism would make a significant contribution to such a project. Imagine harnessing the inventive dynamism of the capitalist mode of production to these tasks.

Imagine too the electoral consequences of running on such a programme, and the political consequences of trying to implement it. As with any process of social change it is much clearer, prior to the process of transition, who will be losers than who will be the winners. An immediate roll-call of losers would include: the petro-chemical, energy and water industries; the car and road industries and their interminable retinue of add-on products and services; agribusiness and monster Fordist fisheries; firms and consumers dependent upon wasteful production and destructive consumption, like cheap processed foods, unnecessary packaging, tobacco, disposable products of all kinds; company profits driven by in-built technological obsolescence; single driver commuters, company car owners, undertaxed air travellers etc, etc, etc. The benefits of a cleaner environment, car free cities, safer food and water and the diminution of catastrophic global risks, be they environmental, economic or social, seem like small change against the likely and immediate consequences of this project for profit margins, employment and opportunities for unrestricted consumption. Moreover, the potential losers - both producers and consumers - are already politically organised, powerful and entrenched. The immediate beneficiaries of such a programme - pedestrians and cycle manufacturers, the renewable energy

industries, organic farmers, future generations - do not amount to much coalition.

However, the limits of environmental politics in the West are not solely due to the relative political strengths of the probable short-term winners and losers resulting from the transition to a sustainable economy. Rather, they are deeply ingrained in the culture and beliefs, the everyday modes of thought and ways of life, of Western societies. The character of the environmental threats that we face is collective, long-term and uncertain. While individuals, on the basis of informal risk assessment, are occasionally prepared to abandon destructive individual habits - like smoking - we are unable to make the same call collectively. The immediate health costs and longer term climatic implications of our addiction to petroleum and the motor car are unquestionably of a greater order of magnitude than those of tobacco smoking. But we live in a culture in which the calculus of risk is seen only in individual terms, the time scale of social and political problems barely reaches to the next set of elections, and the community of fate barely extends to our neighbours, let alone distant others and future generations; in these circumstances, prevarication, free-riding, externalisation of costs and short-term self-interest will be the rule.

Even if we were able to alter these ingrained cultural patterns by reason and persuasion, the most sacrosanct folly all remains: our current conceptions of development and growth, and of wealth and wellbeing, are unalterable and unquestionable. As George Bush chillingly stated, before spiking most of the Rio agreements in 1992, 'The American way of life is not up for negotiation'. It is no surprise that one hundred and fifty years of capitalist economic growth has spawned and fed a culture in which more is better, in which the distinction between wants and needs has evaporated, and in which the luxurious is considered essential. What other culture in human history could try and persuade us that the birth of a child requires the purchase of a five-door estate car, a microwave oven, a separate bedroom for balanced psychological development, and the rest of the paraphernalia of Western parenting? At the same time we wilfully disregard our children's environmental inheritance.

But there are some signs of changing attitudes. The international insurance and pension industries are getting worried by climatic change and enormously expensive environmental litigation. Unlike much of the global financial sector they are forced to calculate their profits over the long term and with some regard for the material consequences of investment and growth. In the developing world,

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despite authoritarian polities and widespread poverty, local and national environmental forces have emerged. International environmental NGOs have become a permanent part of the architecture of global governance. Local resistance to roads, the nuclear industry and landscape destruction is growing in the West as the costs of environmental degradation become inescapable for even the affluent and comfortable. One can detect the subterranean currents of a cultural revolution in the making. The pathologies of Western affluence and overdevelopment are creeping into our consciousness. As every percentage point of growth clicks up, we become more obese or more anorexic, more addicted or more withdrawn. Some of the hottest stocks for the twenty-first century will be in antidepressants and private security. It is becoming apparent that greater personal incomes do not translate into greater happiness; that the index of wellbeing is multifaceted; that the quality of relationships carries more weight than the quantity of consumption. But time is short. This is politics against the clock. The speed at which capitalist development generates environmental threats appears very much greater than the rate at which it nurtures environmental movements. A decade after the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, and still in relentlessly upbeat mood, Marx wrote, 'mankind always sets itself only such problems as it can solve'. Had Engels a copy of the *State of the World* to hand as he read over the manuscript, he might well have noted in the margin, 'Don't bet on it'.

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