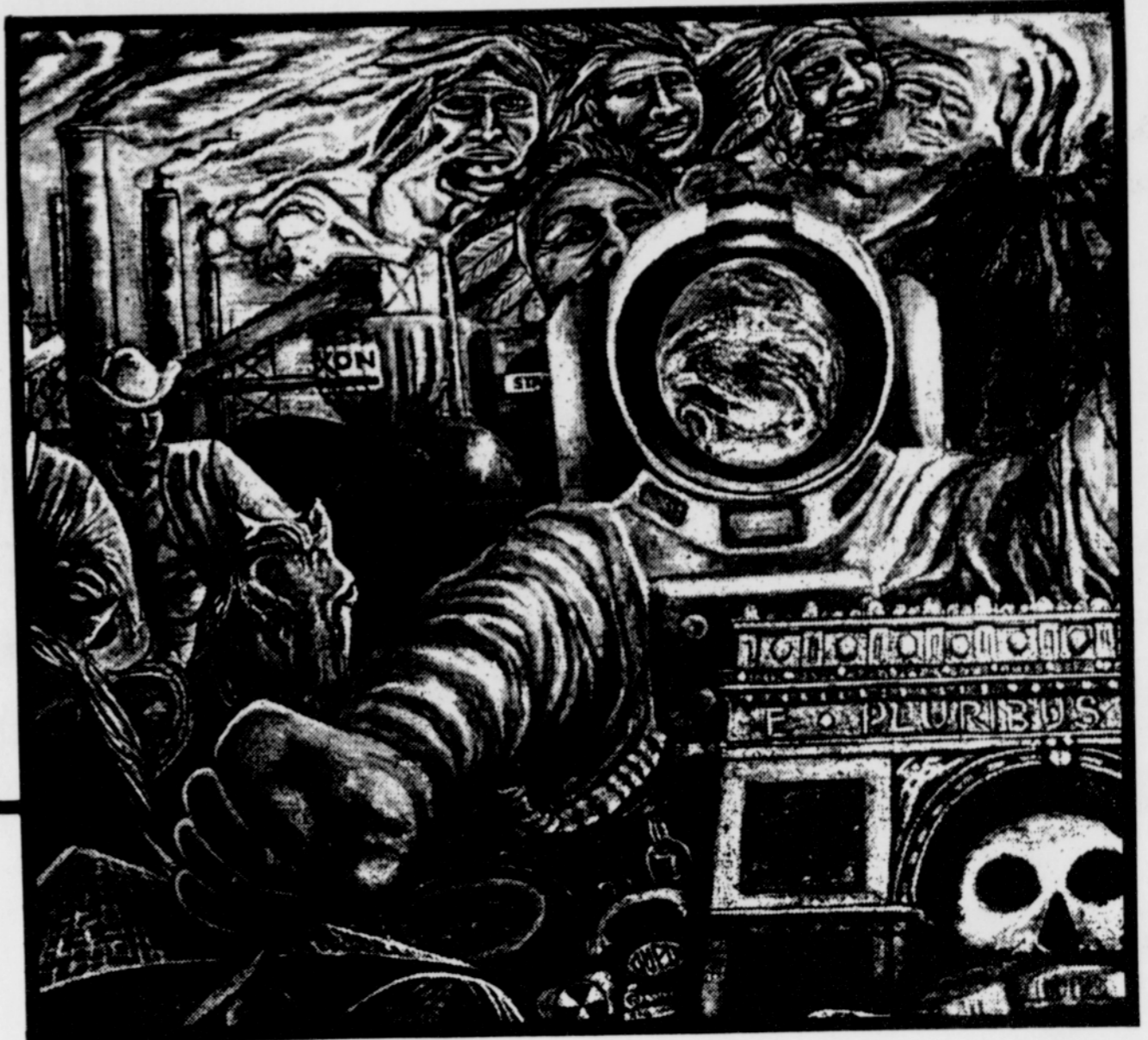


BEHOLD THE 90'S

BY LARRY BARROWS



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We look at the looming 90's and wonder what will happen, locally to globally. Actually, most of what will happen already has. That is, most happenings will result from small-to-large scale choices made in the 1980's and in the 70's, 60's, 50's, 40's, and so on.

Barring the Second Coming, a very little bit of what will happen will be new. There will be some few new ideas and discoveries. There will be some new innovations, but probably oh, so many more new revelations. For the most part the 90's will be an aftershadow of what already is, or has been.

The shape that aftershadow takes, the shape of the 90's, will be determined by the sum of the choices we all make in the light of what has gone on before. We are haunted by that which has been done wrong and has not yet been set right. Until we set those things right, we will be haunted by the past, and we shall haunt the future.

The character and events of the 90's will be shaped mostly by very large-scale circumstances, yet no locality is isolated from the whole. Individuals and small groups can have great impact upon behaviors and outcomes.

Following are some large-scale shapers of things to come. The form they take as they flow through the 90's will depend on whether we walk them down the Light Path or the Blind Path.

Certainly the detrimental human impact on the complex physical and biological systems of the globe is of foremost concern. Will we prevent further damage, and then set about repairing the damage already done, or will we

allow the damage to accumulate? Ozone depletion in the Northern Hemisphere runs about 3% in summer and 6% in winter. At 20% all unprotected eyes will be blinded. The additional ultraviolet light suppresses food crop yields. Will we act quickly enough? Will we deforest or reforest? Will we continue to spew out thousands of deadly toxins, or will we find production pathways that use benign chemical compounds? Will we continue to rely on carbon- and nuclear-based fuels, or will we balance the energy equation? Will we preserve the millions of threatened species, or will we extinguish them? Will we mine the earth's resources and then scatter them away, or will we close the loop and enrich the earth and life upon it, in the same way that a prairie enriches itself by building topsoil? Damage and deplete versus enhance and sustain. These are the challenges that will shape the quality of our home in the 90's.

The nature of the 90's will also be shaped by the impact of humans on humans. In 1990 farmers will have to feed 88 million more people with 24 billion fewer tons of topsoil. 921 million more people will be added to our population during the 90's, the largest increase ever for a decade. Because of recent failures of family planning efforts, world population is expected to level off at about 14 billion, instead of the previously projected 10 billion. Globally, water is becoming critically scarce, whether for irrigation, industry, or bodily use. World grain stocks plunged to their lowest level in decades during the harvest-damaging droughts between 1986 and 1988. With the return of

more favorable weather and higher yields it was expected that stocks would be replenished. That did not happen. Production has fallen below consumption even in the U.S. Prices are rising, with potentially disastrous consequences for the poor, a great portion of whose income goes for food. These are the challenges that will shape the quality of our experience in the 90's.

We have had ample opportunity to identify and address these survival challenges for several decades now. By and large we have chosen to ignore them or, worse, to discredit those who have sounded the alarm. At some point the doors of opportunity will close, and we will be sealed inside the fate of our own default.

Meanwhile, we continue to accede to the concentration of wealth and power and the creation of ever more poor and powerless people. This lack of just access to resources weakens our global society and economy. It encourages high birth rates in societies with no mechanisms for the care of the elderly. It creates a population ever more vulnerable to being misled by short-sighted, self-serving opportunists. It plows, plants, feeds, and waters the garden of deadly conflict.

If we are to have hope we must have a valid and working popular vision of what constitutes a just human society at all levels, and we must be deeply suspicious of those who claim that we already have such a working vision.

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