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“Nuclear Guinea Pigs”: Deadly Experiments and Contaminated Reality

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Half a century ago, on the spurious grounds that extreme sacrifices were required in the battle to prevent a communist takeover of the world, the US government decided to use the citizens of Nevada as nuclear guinea pigs.
Although atomic testing was pursued there for several years in the 1950s, notification would have alarmed area residents. As a result, they weren’t even advised to go indoors. Yet, according to declassified documents, some scientists studying the genetic effects of radiation at the time were already concerned about the health risks of fallout.For most of those committed to the US nuclear program, the need to keep this type of research secret was a no-brainer. After all, if the public realized that the technology used to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki had led to experiments at home, early nuclear research – not to mention weapons deployment – might have met stronger opposition. The government badly wanted its nukes, and the scientists yearned to unlock the secrets of human mutation. Thus, an unholy alliance was struck.

US citizens, and the thousands of soldiers who took dangerous doses of radiation as part of other studies, haven’t been the only victims of science run amuck. Between 1964 and 1968, for example, at least a dozen covert tests of nerve and chemical agents were carried out on servicemen in the Pacific Ocean, then concealed and denied for more than 20 years. Crews were used to gauge how quickly various poisons could be detected, how rapidly they would disperse, and the effectiveness of protective gear and decontamination procedures.

Three tests used sarin, a deadly nerve gas subsequently employed by a cult to kill a dozen people in a Tokyo subway in 1995, or VX, the nerve gas that the US later accused Iraq of developing. One test used staphylococcal enterotoxin B, known as SEB, a crippling germ toxin; another used a “simulant” believed to be harmless but subsequently found to be dangerous. “We do not see things like informed consent or individual protection,” noted Michael Kilpatrick, a Defense Department medical official. “We don’t have the records for what, if any, protection was given to people.”

In a test called Fearless Johnny, carried out southwest of Honolulu during 1965, a Navy cargo ship was sprayed with VX nerve agent to “evaluate the magnitude of exterior and interior contamination levels” under various conditions of readiness, as well as study “the shipboard wash-down system,” according to documents declassified in 2002. Like all nerve agents, VX gas penetrates the skin or lungs to disrupt the body’s nervous system and stop breathing. Exposure can kill.

Another test, known as Flower Drum, involved spraying sarin gas into the ventilation system of a ship. The crew wore various levels of protective gear. A third experiment, Deseret Test

Center Test 68-50, was conducted in 1968 to determine the casualty levels from an F-4 Phantom jet spraying SEB. A jet dropped the deadly mist over part of Eniwetok Atoll and five Army tugboats in the Marshall Islands. Public exposure of the secret tests and identification of those affected did not begin until 2000, and only under pressure from Mike Thompson, a California congressman who responded to veterans suffering health damage.

During the same period, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) spent millions on an even more heinous project: comparing atomic bomb survivors with an "uncontaminated" control group in South America, the Yanomami, who live in the remote Amazon regions of Brazil and Venezuela. Without informed consent or any government's approval, thousands of blood samples were taken from the Indians, and extensive studies were conducted to provide crucial genealogical information on each tribe member. That the AEC research did nothing to help the Yanomami was bad enough. That it led directly to much needless suffering is a prime example of cultural imperialism at its worst.

As Patrick Tierney explained in Darkness in El Dorado, his harrowing account of scientific and journalistic exploitation, the AEC study was but one step in a decades-long process that brought illness, death, and degradation to the Amazon. To study iodine metabolism, ambitious researchers administered radioactive iodine to Yanomami tribes for 10 years. To prove questionable theories about aggression, anthropologists invaded countless communities, neglecting the sick and malnourished, while imposing their own agendas and setting inter-tribal conflicts into motion. Film crews and journalists joined in, bribing tribes to stage fights and feasts for the cameras. The Yanomami became the most famous "primitive" people in the world. But with that attention came modern weapons and imported disease.

Scientists and journalists like to believe that they are neutral witnesses who don't affect the objects of their observation. But this is at best convenient self-deception, and at worst a callous lie. In the Amazon, a prime example was Napoleon Chagnon, the acclaimed anthropologist who made the Yanomami (and himself) famous through a series of expeditions, books, and films. He named them "the Fierce People." But in reality, the tribal warfare he chronicled was mainly sparked by his own invasive actions. Beginning in 1964, he brought shotguns, canoes filled with axes, and, later, helicopters packed with scientific tools, trade goods, and visitors. Playing villages and their leaders off against each other, he ultimately created the conditions he hoped to observe.

"Within three months of Chagnon's sole arrival on the scene, three different wars had broken out," Tierney wrote, "all between groups who had been at peace for some time and all of whom wanted a claim on Chagnon's steel goods." Far from being neutral, Chagnon became a central figure, much hated and feared, in Indian battles over trade goods and machetes. But he was also part of a team. Along with others scientists, filmmakers, writers, and mining entrepreneurs, he stole Yanomami history, extracted countless vials of their blood, corrupted their culture, and manipulated them to prove his theories.

A terrible tale to be sure, but certainly not unique. Every day, news crews and researchers descend on individuals and communities throughout the world, conducting themselves in similar ways. They arrive with embedded assumptions, carelessly conduct their "research," and usually find precisely what they are looking for, whether or not it is true. On TV, we see the products of this "field work," otherwise known as the news.

In recent years, we also have witnessed the manipulation of perceptions weekly in

experiments called “reality shows.” Most of these programs are based on the assumption that competition, fame and distrust are the fundamental truths of our time. But the contestants are not the only subjects of this research. In a sense, so are the viewers, closely watched to see if they accept the premise.

Finally, there is the largest experiment of the moment, known as corporate globalization. Described by many experts as an indisputable fact of post-modern life, it is actually another deadly project, a sequel to the industrial revolution. And we know how well that one has gone for the planet. But like the victims in Nevada, the South Pacific, and the Amazon, we haven’t been told about the real costs or objectives. The truth, after all, might lead to resistance and accountability.

As many scientists now acknowledge, conceiving any experiment is the experience of an observer who is also a participant. Building on the theory of relativity, quantum physics has demonstrated that every measurement requires an act of intervention. As quantum physicist John Wheeler explained, “Participator is the incontrovertible new concept given by quantum mechanics. It strikes down the term ‘observer’ of classical theory, the man who stands safely behind the thick glass wall, and watches what goes on without taking part. It can’t be done, quantum mechanics says.”

And so, if there is really no way to observe any event or phenomenon without somehow affecting what happens, what are journalists or scientists to do? Well, at least act responsibly. This means acknowledging bias, intervening with compassion, and providing enough information to let the public make its own, fully informed choices.

Greg Guma’s second novel, Dons of Time, will be published in October by Fomite Press.

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