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A May Day MANIFESTO

*“A map of the world
that does not include Utopia
is not worth even glancing at...”*

OSCAR WILDE,
THE SOUL OF MAN UNDER SOCIALISM, 1891



POST-CAPITALISM

THE SELF-DESTRUCTION OF FREE MARKET ECONOMICS in the last 6 months has been dramatic. As a complex of fictional financial devices disintegrated, the aggressive greed of both local banking systems and global financial markets has been openly exposed. Obscene profits and massive social differentials are inscribed in the logic of a predatory economy, the untenable debts of international banks connect with the unsustainable loans to companies and governments and finally the borrowing which underpins our households.

This may have been revelatory to many, used to the complacency of a media that has always reiterated the assumption that our economic and social system was beyond criticism and permanent. As free market dogma is finally and decisively challenged the invisible suffering in our societies begins to surface. The last 20 years has seen an increasing gap between the surplus wealth of the top strata and the subsistence economy of lower income groups and this has created liquidity for high income groups, encouraging financialisation, speculation and the recent dot.com and housing market crashes¹.

Over the last decades the state sector has been reduced and privatised rather than modernised and expanded; extensions of education and health have been accompanied by incursions into free provision. These shifts to the centre (right) have taken place alongside a hollowing out of politics, with lower levels of popular interest and participation, the decay of involvement in political parties and smaller proportions of the population taking part in the successive electoral processes of depoliticised western democracies. The convergent politics of our democratic system is based on a tired and limited assumption that participation can be reduced to electing a representative every five years. Is it not beyond the ingenuity of men and women to devise grassroots structures where individuals, citizens and groups can play a persistent and active role in decision making at all levels? Can we envision a participatory-democratic community that empowers its citizens throughout their lives?

The refutation of 'accidents of nature' and the redistribution of power and possession between and within the societies of the north and the south of the planet is no longer merely a question of social justice. Addressing the disparity between the prosperity of the 'developed' world and the poverty of much of the 'developing' world also implicates the economies of perpetual growth which have endangered the planet. We now, in different parts of the world, have to begin to think again about how we work, live and spend our free time.

¹ Damaging boom and bust cycles have characterised the capitalist market since early days, exemplified by the South Sea Bubble in 1720.

The current situation demands more than palliative measures or minor modifications; arguments are currently being made for light regulation, but they will not mitigate the economic violence of an anachronistic system. It remains to be seen whether the choices we are offered as producers and consumers are sustainable even in a revived version of capitalism based on competitive entrepreneurship and enterprise. The organisation of society on the principle of private gain is structured into short-termism, a narrow view of profit maximalisation and an underlying tendency towards incorporation into ever larger-scale units. Learning from the mistakes, distortions and repressions of previous versions of state socialism we can develop versatile models of humane economic endeavour. In fact forms of interaction based on need rather than profit and exploitation already exist in our experiences of small-scale politics and economics in myriad human relationships and creative labour.²

IT'S TOO LATE?

BY THIS POINT THE NEED TO ADDRESS URGENT MATTERS that threaten the existence of our planet and its ecological systems has belatedly become clear. Changes are underway which will completely transform the conditions of life on earth and yet resilient right wing ideologues still hold conferences financed by self-interested corporations to deny what is happening in front of our eyes.

There are underlying relationships between ecology, the economy and the destructive psychology of the (mainly male) expanding ego: "the natural world is there for us, let's maximise our use of it!" connects with "other people are there for us, let's maximise our use of them!" We have to learn to think for the longer-term, how to be 'good ancestors' and not bequeath a 'sick planet'³ for future generations. The inevitable outcome of a longstanding process of acquisition and accumulation now endangers us all.

Recent small adventurist wars reveal that many of our politicians have a self-righteous taste for violence. Is there no way that all parties in a multi-polar world can devise strategies to redeploy our resources currently wasted on the military industrial complex? At this stage in human history there are no more excuses for those reversions to barbarity and tribalism, whether enacted by the would-be modern states or those characterised as still hung up on ancient and anachronistic hatreds. The diversity of identity and culture (Hutu and Tutsi, Jew and Arab, Serb and Moslem) can be the basis for celebrating diversity and co-habitation, not competition and conflict.

² Chto Delat? / What is to be Done? (www.chtodelat.org).

³ Guy Debord, *A Sick Planet*, 1971.

THE SOUTH

THE THIRD WORLD IS NOT A RECEPTACLE FOR EXOTICISM and tourist consumption, in fact there is a sense that current perspectives from developing countries offer a productive and transformatory point of view for Europe and North America. The ‘Plea for Products of High Necessity’ issued recently from Guadeloupe in the Caribbean⁴ is inspiring and resolute in its reaffirmation of the utopian. Its vision of plenitude vaults over the future, imagining an ideal condition without providing a route.

There is some resonance between the ideals outlined here with those glimpses of real political possibility in the recent historical terrain: say Orwell observing Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War in 1937, the guerrilleros liberating Cuba in 1959, Thomas Sankara’s Burkina Faso in 1985, and a number of Latin American countries undergoing radical change at this time. The prospects and patterns of thoroughgoing political transformation will be different in each place. But we should carry with us those extraordinary moments of optimism and energy when people shift into a new mode, when it seems possible that they can collectively seize control of their own destiny.

MEN AND WOMEN

DESPITE THE SIGNIFICANT ADVANCES OF THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT over the last decades any glance at statistics on wages, a headcount of senior management in commercial companies or governmental or semi-state structures, indicates the persistence of gross imbalances between those born under a blue blanket and those born under a pink one.

Diversity of emotional and polysexual relations should be celebrated – surely we can discard disconcertion with gay and lesbian relationships, and all those attitudes connected with intolerant, backward-looking forms of thinking generally? At this stage in history there is no time to waste on aggressive insecurities emanating from racial or national differences. We must work towards forms of society whereby differences: cultural, national, gender, racial, class – and a myriad of others – are enunciated with greater vividness and specificity, but are not arranged hierarchically. We share each other’s technology and culture, poetry and philosophy, we have to begin to think of ourselves as a family.⁵

So much of our experience in the families of man (of the many conditions of being human) are actually the same. And these are continuous, contiguous versions of that same biped on this same planet, at this same moment of time:

⁴ *Le Monde*, 16 February 2009.

⁵ I.F. Stone, ‘How It Happens’.

everyday talking, eating, making loving, friendship, the tenderness of children... these are so similar between us all and there’s always reason for asserting that connection. But until we can reach a saner basis there is also a strong motive for insistence on the differences that separate us at the moment – those more desperate disparities of wealth and power. The savage structures of exploitation, oppression and uneven development cannot be completely hidden.

The engagement and involvement of young people gives cause for hope. We should listen to youth who burn bright with ideas and hope, who have rejected the passive apathy, inertia and despondency that comes from a situation which encourages the feeling that they are powerless to change anything. Idealism is not unrealistic nostalgia for some golden age – a new generation can go further and faster than their parents were ever able to.

CULTURE AND EVERYDAY LIFE

“My greatest work of art is my use of time” Marcel Duchamp.

WILLIAM MORRIS PROPOSED THE SLOGAN “LEISURE FOR ALL” in 1894 and we still need to rethink the way in which we spend our lives; the ‘Plea for Products of High Necessity’ describes humanity’s struggle to replace the ‘prosaic’ with the ‘poetic’. The cost of culture should be made free or minimised and more of our time taken with music and pictures and sport, debate and dancing. Real art is communal and active; it is not owned by anyone, but should become the intellectual and emotional air we breathe and take a role in the reconstruction of civil society.⁶ In a radical extension of access to culture we need to rethink the questions and issues of copyright to extend communal access while ensuring returns to artistic producers. As film director Shekhar Kapur quipped recently “In India we see the word copyright as the right to copy”.

One can view modernism as a dead end, the time when the idea of the artist broke against the reality of public taste. It is also possible however to view modern art as a beginning of a long revolution that will not be finished until every existence is illuminated. Contemporary forms of art practice can create a space for active participation in culture and society.

Architecture which has possibilities to enhance and extend our visual environment is too often still buried beneath the unaesthetic, lazy planning and the collusive, venal structures that continue to dominate planning decisions and damage the cityscapes and landscapes which we inhabit. It is no more costly to make the buildings we live, work and play in fine-looking responses to location and culture.

⁶ Lee Hall/Richard Gott.

Approaches to education underpin any idea of reinventing society on a more inclusive and equal basis. The long tradition of libertarian schooling has always argued against defining intelligence by the very narrow criteria imposed by exams. Versions of logical and linguistic aptitude dominate at the expense of cultural, physical, social, personal, moral and spiritual intelligence. Most recently English teachers have suggested that “We should ask not how intelligent is the child, but how are they intelligent.”⁷

It is extraordinary that the private secondary education which separates sections of our children into privilege continues to exist. State education systems are weakened by the existence of an ‘independent’ sector for the children of middle-class families. Too often faith schools have narrowed, not opened, children’s minds and beliefs.

If we discarded the narrow choking straightjacket of examination systems and constrictive curricula, schools could be liberating places which encourage co-operative working on small-group projects, rather than instigating competitive individualism, supporting children’s imagination and creativity rather than insisting on regurgitation from such an early age. The time spent in school should be an opening of hearts and minds; soulless, loveless, desiccated education can damage young people for a lifetime. The process of creating a constructive, supportive environment that will encourage critical faculties and independence must take place at school and at home. Meanwhile at university we hear a generation of teachers, undermined by managerialism, admit “we are not looking for broad achieving and rounded students at this college. In fact, we are not rounded people ourselves...”⁸

BE REALISTIC – DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE

IN A PERIOD WHEN ELEMENTARY DEMANDS FOR THE POSSIBLE are lazily rejected as romantic and unrealistic, there’s very little time left to muster this broader vision against the ancient, conditioned reflexes that mankind has taught itself and the persistence of destructive psychoses. The movement of ideas into activity is through personal, organisational or direct action. Local communities connect with wider movements, small autonomous groups link into concerted activity. Personal, voluntary commitments grow into a systematic critique and activity. Capitalism has failed – we have the critical opportunity to explore the process of combining elements of the market with social planning, creating a new mutual respect between humans and a collective respect for nature.

⁷ Anthony Seldon in ‘Focus on fact is stifling schools warns top head’, The Observer, 8th March 2009.

⁸ Ibid.

Some may like to remember the lines of an ancient biblical vision of things: “The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox... they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain.”⁹ This primeval version of a millennial vision was written by a prophet called Isaiah as part of an older testament, but the caring and tenderness, passion and compassion between people can come to pass in our time and place...

These are questions and agendas to begin with and attend to rather than fixed or dogmatic proscriptions: the start of a journey, rather than a point of arrival. In fact such thoughts are a revival for our very survival, a modest proposal for small pragmatic, experimental, human steps towards a new world...

non-copyright 2009.



⁹ Isaiah 65:25.

POSTSCRIPT

IN ITS INITIAL INCEPTION THIS MANIFESTO WAS TO BE COLLECTIVELY WRITTEN and called a Burren Manifesto after the specific community and landscape on the West Coast of Ireland close to Killeenaran, the village where I have lived for 15 years. The writing of it was supported by constructive comments and suggestions, despite geographical disparity, from Des O’Rawe in Belfast and Alan Fountain in London, the latter wondering if this would be the first manifesto with footnotes.¹⁰

Tossed like a message in a bottle into the sea on 1st May 2009 it quickly found itself on a number of websites:

www.21stcenturysocialism.com

www.irishleftreview.org

www.aughty.org

www.conamara.org

Their early decisions to publish it are appreciated, as are the efforts of Nuala Kenny and Adam Stoneman who sent it off in many different libertarian directions; and to Íde Deloughry who made this design.

Nearly a year later I do not feel there is so much in the draft to reformulate or change. There have been recent suggestions from Latin America of launching a 5th International.¹¹ It would be timely to explore the creation of loose creative alliances of individuals and groups as the epoch of the political party has surely passed. They could connect under a new banner and its inscriptions would have to go beyond the 18th century tricolour of liberty – equality – fraternity to include the green of ecology and the black and red flag of grassroots democracy.

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Galway, March 2010

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Dedicated to Adam, Otto and Finn – it is their future that is at stake.



¹⁰ In fact this aspect follows André Breton’s *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1930.

¹¹ www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/4956