

Reclaiming the Future

September 12, 2016



My most enduring memory of the student movement was of the power and the creativity that it brought. At Millbank, on Day X, in the university occupations. It was what some of us called a 'magic moment', where political space-time seemed to curve around us, where it felt that we might win, and that what we did mattered. While there was a degree of naive optimism that fueled that, there was also truth. Others had those moments during the 2011 riots, during 1968. Having that momentary power taken from you is painful - we don't realise how little power we have until we glimpse it.

Marx wrote about revolutionary periods, ruptures in the social order, as 'festivals of the oppressed'. This was not just because they were street parties, though they often were, but because the process of social revolution changes not just the world, but the people who are participants. At this incredibly bleak moment of history, there is a profound need to imagine, and articulate how different life could be.

Some have already started chaining this imagination to the present. Accelerationist ideas around Fully Automated Luxury Communism have grown through the efforts of Novara Media, and Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' *Inventing the Future* starts to scratch out a manifesto; for universal basic income, full automation on our terms, on a world without work. That project needs to go further, and it needs to explore the huge plurality of ways people could begin to express their selves and their labour. If we neglect the potential for the world's population to place their own emancipation centre stage, we risk losing sight of what revolutionary transformation is for.

Remaking ourselves

Transition to a post-capitalist society is not inevitable. It does not need to happen; it is not destined to take place. Certain Marxists have argued the idea that economic changes force social changes - this is known as economic determinism.

What this scrubs out is the agency of the marginalised, the oppressed and exploited. We are not simply pushed towards militancy by bad material conditions - we revolt when we see some meaning in resistance, something that gives us purpose. So the idea of the 'festival of the oppressed' is in itself an argument about what change is seeking to achieve. It is not just the material conditions of people's lives (and in no way does that ignore the gross degradation of the material conditions of billions of people across the world), but what society is for.

The concept of emancipation should be written in neon lights when we talk about revolution. Emancipation isn't just freedom, it is the "actualisation", the "making real" of our very core being.

We cannot be ourselves, we cannot realise our potential, when the things that we do every day are torn from our being. The products of our labour are alienated from us, individually, and collectively – the vast majority of people have no real say in what the colossal production and reproduction of society is for. That we have fifteen hundred different styles of toothbrush but none that last. Or that we have nose-bleedingly high military research bills, but mould-ridden schools and care homes. Those of us who work in care work know that what we want to achieve for those who we want to support is constantly thwarted, yet it is something that we can rarely get a say in. There is little to no democracy in the daily grind. There are a few visions of the collective that we are allowed to embody – the crowds of frenzied consumers empowering market forces through their shopping habits, the stable, normal family popping out and preparing more lifeblood for the labour market, or as a national subject, part of a crowd penned behind a fence for thirty hours, craning to glimpse a royal wave before weeping into a polyester union jack. But any collective power that seeks to question that is illegitimate. Actual power is not for us.

None of this is a revelation. Most of us are aware of the painful inadequacy of life under neoliberalism, and how disempowering it is. More interesting then, is what power actually might feel like. We've had some glimpses. The Paris Commune, Egypt in 2011, Russia in 1917, Oakland in the USA during Occupy and Millbank in the student protests of 2010. In these moments we witness those who have been forced to the margins of society re-take the stage, determine how their environment is run. We see how quickly people build their own systems, their own culture, with astounding creativity. Every minute matters, and every action has purpose.

Does this mean that everything we do, every achievement, every supportive moment for a friend, is meaningless? This clearly can't be the case, and when we talk about the festival of the oppressed being the "actualisation of ourselves", that doesn't come with a derisory scoff. The achievements we make in life, especially when they run against the grain of what's expected and encouraged in us, are never irrelevant.

However in the current system our so-called "individuality" is not our own. This is crucial, especially for those of us used to fielding the claim that socialists want everyone to be the same. Capitalism forces us into roles, identities, genders, positions, races that we rarely get to choose, and then forces us to define ourselves by these identities.

Curing these ills

So revolutionary Marxism makes a bold statement: it says that revolution is the only process that solves these problems, and many more. Well, yes, but not without conditions. Precisely because capitalism cannot truly fulfil the lives of all those who are exploited and oppressed, it is those billions on the margins who have both the interest and the potential to replace capitalism.

In other words, the flourishing of ourselves is what takes place when we take back the world, and the prerequisite for it. This is a big claim, but it is not fantasy. It is the logical conclusion of capitalism. Capitalism requires more and more exploitation to survive. As that exploitation increases the size of the only class that can overthrow the system also increases.

Within the values of capitalist individualism there is a core callousness that serves to justify the rule of the few over the many. That those in power are there because of their merits and their efforts. This is callous, because it implies that anyone who isn't in those positions has little of merit to offer society, other than as a lower paid worker for those in power.

This is not the truth – the rich history of proletarian intellectuals, art produced in the hours between two shifts disprove the myth that success is the same thing as hard work. A key component of the

festival of the oppressed is that these otherwise thwarted potentials would have the chance to be fully recognised. And on a global scale, the possibilities that provides are exhilarating. If labour was detached from runaway accumulation, and the things that we do no longer directed towards profit – what could be done? What medical cures, what artistic endeavours, what environmental preservation, what scientific research? On one level, the ruination of the ecology and the bodies of workers has meant that we need to realise the potential of the mass of society simply to survive as a species. Pharma industry and agriculture have made antibiotics less effective, and we have probably already gone past the point of no return with the climate.

Liberating ourselves

However, a world where the majority of us had the ability to change our environment, where democracy was not an artifice but a deep, daily reality, would mean that even those struggles for survival would take on an entirely different feel. Where our labour has meaning, and the things that we do are relevant and necessary. In the process of liberating ourselves from pointless work, we are able to rest, to think. But history has shown us that people rarely want to do just that. Imagine being witness to a rapid outpouring of new forms of art, new forms of story-telling, new geographies, new ways for us to understand, inhabit and move through our cities, revolutionary logistics, programming and engineering, for the purpose of arresting the damage done to our world. Proactive healthcare, free medication, open therapy, for the purpose of arresting the damage done to our bodies. Truth and reconciliation, at a thousand different levels. Serious projects to end the dynamics of oppression. That seems to me at least like an exciting future.

Bourgeois thought understands this desire for purpose, and at the same time completely misses the point. This is summed up well in Steve Jobs' "Do What You Love and Love What You Do" speech, where he reminds us that "time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life." Presumably, if Foxconn workers showed a little more creativity and willingness to take risks, then they wouldn't have found themselves in jobs where they wanted to throw themselves off the roof in order to escape. The gross inadequacy of this mantra as a means of explaining away why work feels so dull and pointless is obvious. Yet it has some purchase, and that needs to be examined. The millions of productivity lifehacks, dream job Pinterest boards, self-help books and lifestyle gurus suggest that there is a thirst for happiness and meaning. And this is in spite of the almost final triumph of neoliberal politics over working class power.

Steve Jobs' achievements are also questionable. The contradictions of his 'innovative' myth reveal the ludicrous nature of commodity production in the 21st century. The fact that most of the ground-breaking technology in iPhones was either the result of government-funded research, or by legal ransacking of more minor firms. But also the inbuilt obsolescence of modern technology, designed to fail after a short period to encourage greater consumption. Capitalism has arrived, for the first time in history, with the means to feed, clothe and shelter everyone, yet at the same time cannot because it is chained to chasing an ever decreasing profit.

Bourgeois thought doesn't have the means to explain why the crisis isn't ending, and so re-positions the pain we feel from a lack of meaning back onto us as individuals. We are left facing greater mental ill-health, and a culture that can only discuss the future in apocalyptic, dystopian terms.

The few token members of oppressed groups who make it into the upper echelons of power also have no meaningful future to offer us. The lack, for example, of a relevant LGBTQ politics is conveniently (yet not completely) demonstrated in Caitlyn Jenner, a transwoman of tremendous privilege who is treated by the media as the first trans person ever, and yet who is prepared to champion Donald Trump, to defend a racist, exclusionary, sexist politics in order to slowly advance one section of identity-based rights. But then Jenner doesn't need liberation, she has wealth and

power. Trans-people, gender nonconforming people across the world need liberation, need a future that seizes the means of gendered production, and where a thousand genders bloom. And where there are no borders. Any future liberation cannot be achieved at the expense of someone else's oppression, which is why the political centrality of the individual under capitalism is such a roadblock to the actual expression of so many people's individuality!

Rebuilding hope

It might sound ridiculous to look at the aspirations of 'Millennials' – too scientifically and politically vague to constitute a class – and see a desire for a post capitalist world. But that's not the argument. Rather that, as the crisis of capital accumulation continues, a crisis of capitalist values accompanies it. Bourgeois thought does not have a response to the ecological crisis. Globally, politics is polarising away from the centre, partly because nationalist and sectarian splinters of the ruling class are able to build on insecurity and fear and direct it towards racism, precisely because the mainstream has no vision of the future. Young support of Sanders and Corbyn speaks of a different set of aspirations. Part of the task of critical politics is not just to tell people what their desires and actions should be, but to understand what they actually want. Doubtless, consumerism, maker culture and professional aspiration have deep roots in capitalist values. But the reason for their appeal is not simply the triumph of those capitalist values, but the alienation that it produces, which drives us to find meaning in commodities, work or hobbies. We need to re-invigorate the idea of revolution, flesh it out as a future worth dreaming about, not as something opposed to the everyday desires that people have, their own quests for meaning, but as the process whereby that meaning can actually start to appear. It has to be exciting and imaginative, because there is absolutely nothing inevitable about revolution – catastrophe is still as much a possibility.

The potentials for technological innovation are colossal, but they are thwarted if the social relations in which they occur continue. The left certainly needs to understand technological development, provide a critique of its form and function whilst attempting to wrest it towards the helping the majority.

Revolution is not close, success is not certain and the left is in disarray. Yet the left cannot abandon the future to fear, it cannot reduce itself to resistance for resistance's sake. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung claimed that the "sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being". Faced with the growing immiseration and destruction of the world, this idea is almost an expression for the humanitarianism that people show: solidarity in the face of collapse. Whilst this is good, and inspiring, we need more. More than kindling a light, we need to shoot up a flare, light a bonfire, explode the darkness entirely.

This article originally appeared in the Spring 2016 issue of the rs21 magazine.