

Present imperfect – future tense? In Search of a New Vision

Such are the days that shall be! But
What are the deeds of today
In the days of the years we dwell in
That wear our lives away?
Why, then, and for what are we waiting?
There are but three words to speak
We will it, and what is the foeman
But the dream strong wakened and weak?
*R. Tressell, The Ragged Trousered
Philanthropists (1914), P. 504.*

‘The dream strong wakened and weak’ indeed. Marxists are always aware in varying degrees of our history but usually rather less aware of the demands of the present and the future. What is it to be a revolutionary in the 21st century in Western Europe? Why do we consider revolution as possible? What are we doing this for?

‘In the days of the years we dwell in’

What is the meaning of these days? Globalization has reshaped much of the world in uneven, haphazard but real ways. It has been thoroughly destabilizing across the world and in every aspect of our lives. Think about the art of communication alone and how it has changed in the past ten or even five years. One feature in Britain has been a thorough restructuring of the working class as it was previously understood. The ‘big battalions’ of labour with the huge workplaces have gone for the most part, replaced by offices, supermarkets and highly specialized sectors of engineering (to take one example). Huge employers remain in a few areas such as the NHS with 1.4 million employees but the traditions of an identity conscious working class with traditions of mass struggle has fallen away.

The offices and supermarkets have not developed this tradition and so the sense of working class consciousness is yet to reappear. When it does, it is likely to do so in new ways and forms. Wage labour still exists as the defining relationship of capitalism but it is heavily mitigated by most workers understanding of their lives.

There are areas of the world where the growth of the working class has been based around manufacturing industry and the traditional model. In Argentina, Brazil and Chile for example, to be a working class activist thirty years ago would have meant prison or the football stadium (and not to watch a game) but now mass workers parties have emerged. More than this, the political expression of socialist ideas has been dominated by the continuance of Cuba’s regime, Hugo Chavez and Subcomandante Marcos and the awesome Zapatista rebellion in Mexico.

The Seattle explosion, the push for global justice and the anger at global poverty have given birth to occasional movements against the global institutions of the world economy. The growing awareness of climate change and its disastrous implications has politicized environmental movements and fed into the anger at effete global institutions of capitalism. These movements have involved organizational and political forms of expression that challenge the left’s traditional methods and the left has struggled to adapt. What does this mean for how we act as revolutionary socialists, the forms of organization we are involved with and the language we use?

Globalization has also involved war and the assertion of imperial power. This has been

profoundly contradictory but has represented the attempt by the US government to break free of the lack of confidence borne of the Vietnam defeat. Nowhere has this been unchallenged and nowhere has it secured a victory or even proceeded as designed. However, the US and British governments have remained committed to these adventures and all the 'shock and awe' propaganda this brings. There have been powerful and stunningly strong indigenous movements of resistance in Afghanistan and Iraq but these have not been leftist in character in any sense. There has been a permanent requirement for an anti-war movement in Britain but this has taken different forms and complexions. The mass audience for the anti-imperialist message and the autonomous and complex politics of the indigenous movements of resistance raise significant questions for revolutionaries. How do we argue as anti-imperialists and support non leftist resistance movements?

The fall of Stalinism has been a major contributory factor to the demise of leftist resistance movements. It has also contributed to the decay of working class identity in the last thirty years. Many activists viewed the collapse of the Soviet Union as the historic end of Marxism and the socialist project. The sense of defeat that demoralized many has robbed the labour movement of huge amounts of experience, tradition and knowledge. This did not just affect the communist parties but the reformist left as well, which was heavily influenced by varying shades of sympathy and 'Cold War' loyalty to the 'socialist camp'. Much as we despised Stalinism, its Western corollary did act as the intellectual glue of the labour movement.

Likewise the post Second World War tradition of Marxist organization, especially among 'Trotskyist' groups has proved

equally time limited. This has been characterized by a complete lack of success in reaching a mass audience. Such was the absorption and distortion of Marxist politics and strategy that much of the left has developed organizations that bear a closer relation to Stalinism than Marxism. Given the singular lack of success of the last sixty years, should we try to follow the prescription again? If not, what ways should we work in? How should we work together? Why should we work together and as revolutionaries now? Is this the end of an entire historical episode? Is it the beginning of another?

'Better phone up Robin Hood. Ask him for some wealth distribution'

This is not an argument for throwing out the whole tradition that we have tried to build. Rather it is an argument for re-assessing the tradition in a thoroughgoing way that examines its relevance. If there is to be 're-groupment', is it to be much like the formulas of the last thirty years? None of these have been particularly successful.

The pressing requirement to construct broad parties of the left is not accidental. It is the logic of the impact of the collapse of Stalinism in taking away whole layers of experience and vision from the movement. It is the logic of the changing world of globalization, imperial power, non leftist resistance movements and a restructured working class struggling to find its identity. Respect has the potential to be such a broad party. At present, the Green Party also has this potential, though a split is likely in the event of the ascendancy of the Green Left. The coalescing of a Green Left is an important dimension of the anti-war movement and the political turmoil of the Labour government.

The construction of these parties, their politics, culture, democracy, community oriented strategy and organizational strength poses enormous challenges to revolutionaries. Building campaigning parties that stand for more than elections is a challenge. This is an aspect of the resistance we are building. There are other types and aspects of resistance that will pose challenges of this magnitude. What is our relationship to these projects? How does this affect our activity as Respect members or as Green Party members? Should we be politically exclusive?

‘There are but three words to speak. We will it.’

What is the nature of common struggle? When we link arms in solidarity, why do we do it? We all wish to build the struggle in any way possible and this often involves solidarity with those that fight back. How do we do this in a meaningful way that builds long term support for our ideas? These are important questions that raise uncomfortable conclusions about some of the cardinal principles on which we have organized historically. We have very small numbers compared to our tasks and it is clear that democratic centralism does not fit as an organizational method for any grouping of revolutionaries that emerges. At present, it is not fit for purpose. Indeed, with the kind of tasks before us, it is a serious question to wonder if it will ever be the correct form of organization again.

What is the essence of being a revolutionary? Is it to carry around our principles as baggage for all to see and wonder at? What have we learned? What have we shared? How and why do we organize with fellow revolutionaries? Reflection is a precious and valuable asset

that many of us are poorly skilled to use. We need to learn to educate ourselves as well as agitate, to reflect upon our experiences in trying to build a broad party, to do this collectively. This demands an alternative form of organization derived more from the global justice movement than from the post war Marxist – the loose collective model that does not establish itself as separate from the wider party. A national grouping of such collectives will necessarily have a federated structure with a high degree of autonomy that permits the maximum political development of local leaders within the broad party. Shouldn't we avoid false dichotomies in the new party? Are we trying to build a transitional party 'formation' or a stable political culture and force that can grow into something much larger?

We firmly believe that Respect represents the birth of the latter force that can form a core political location and culture for the larger re-alignments of the left (not necessarily the traditional left) that takes shape in the next decade. In order to develop an effective, non-sectarian current of revolutionaries, the collectives will need to conduct themselves with complete transparency, openness and in a manner that is consistently fraternal. Discussion, reflection and collective experience sharing in building Respect and in the meaning of being a revolutionary now are good aims. Our activism in building Respect and the networks and alliances that will promote the aims of Respect should speak for itself.

Please feel free to discuss these and other proposals.

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