



Photo: Bruce Dickson

Interview with Dan O'Neill

(transcript of a taped interview recorded and transcribed by Bruce Dickson in late 1974. Publication details at end of this document.)

Well, that's all very complex. It seems to me that you could say that particularly on this campus a rather complex series of events took place of the following kind. From very different traditions: the left wing of the Catholic tradition, from a tradition that I'd describe as Benthamite individualistic nationalism, from slightly more traditional left currents, and from within a very much American-oriented New Left position, a number of people embodying ideas out of these traditions worked from a stage of either sporadic action or concerted and fairly theoretical discussion towards a situation that was triggered off by the traffic regulations.

Although 4,000 people marched into town on this Civil liberties issue, practically the rest of the University walked along beside them until there was a conflict with the police. It wasn't really about any of the individual things it started out to be about, nor was it about Civil Liberties but it turned out that we'd brought ourselves into what you might describe as the struggle of our generation, and in particular into of the issues that exploded out of the Vietnam war.

I think what we brought ourselves into was the fact of the emergence of the Third World, the breaking of the Cold War, the fact of world-wide imperialism; also, as it emerged more clearly later on, the really deep inner forces in people that were assisting those things to continue, and that were in a way introjecting the oppression.

For most people there was a vast kind of green fog inside them stopping them from seeing the nature of the structural issues.

And that's why for so very long, all of those people seemed to be a kind of dissenting minority — no matter what the differences between them were — and it wasn't only in Australia but in all other countries, they seemed to be the vast silent majority as it was called, a kind of lunatic fringe, because it seemed to me there was a sort of a space inside people between their oppression as an external fact and their oppression as an internal fact, that had the consistency and the stability of some kind of concrete.

It was this that prevented them from making the connections that a few people all over the western world and then later on in Eastern Europe were beginning to make with increasing trenchancy but more importantly with a renewed political passion. It seems to me that political passion is the really decisive factor distinguishing the new left currents from the old left currents. So what was more important than the ideologies into which we all later became constricted was the sheer creativity of the intense refusal of a vast interrelated set of structures that were both outside us and inside us that we didn't understand.

I always remember in this connection my friend Peter Thompson's continual remark that "the official world was crazy!" It was as if the massiveness of what we were against could only be described in terms that made it seem like one "vast buzzing nightmare"; James Joyce had said this in one of his books. He has Stephen Daedalus say that history is a nightmare from which he is trying to awaken.

The short answer is that there was something so massive going on in the world and the changes in the individual lives of those people who were sensitive to those outside changes, that you were always tempted to a short-hand description, you were always tempted to what one writer called "the great refusal". But what was really needed was what Rudi Deutsche called "the long march through the existing institutions". But what we didn't know at that stage was that the long march through the existing institutions wouldn't be a simple linear progression but would be in fact as tortuous a march as the long March through China from which he took the metaphor.

We attempted to take a short cut and we didn't know it was a short cut. Around 1968 I well remember the first day on which red flags and green flags were stuck up in the forum area. Now the forum area had become for me and for many others a symbol of intense collective discussion from many viewpoints. Now I think what happened was that after the triggering off of theory by the American New Left events, there was a sudden consolidation of theory in a premature way by an invitation of the New Left as it emerged in European countries.

We had a whole complex of concerns and preoccupations and a whole depth of new creativity, new passion, many positive and negative things inside us that were directed against, in a way, the manner in which the entire society was being run. That is, we were not only against its socio-economic organisation but we were also against the reasons why it couldn't seem to have any other socio-economic organisation. We were against a whole, epoch of history, we were against, or at least I think we were against, the roots of industrialism, the habits of thought that led to industrialism and to capitalism, we were against Western rationalism, empiricism, we were against the misuse of technology and the roots of the misuse of technology, we were against in a certain sense Science, or the abuse of Science, we were against the connection of Science and power; we were against the connection of the University world with the military industrial complex, we were against all that.

And the only available ideology that had any pretensions to comprehending such a vast number of concerns was some version of the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Now I think that the sad and awful fact is that the Marxist-Leninist ideology simply does not comprehend the immensity of the present crisis. I'd like to quote at this point one very pregnant remark of a man with whom I disagree on many issues but whose general analysis seems to me to have the tragic radicalism that is required by any analysis of this period. I speak of Ivan Illich.

He says that we've been through a crisis IN our civilization before (in 1929, for example); we face a crisis OF our civilization in which there is probably going to be just one really big enormous crackup, and this crackup is going to be of such proportions and occur in so many interlocked dimensions that unless people have begun to prepare themselves spiritually and morally and mentally for it beforehand, they're just going to be utterly bewildered. And it seems to me that we can already see traces of that bewilderment around in that many of the existing Marxist groups are acting out long-established Western rationalistic defense mechanisms against a bewilderment which corresponds to a play of forces that can no longer be comprehended by any single ideology of any of the dissenting groups.

What I'm not suggesting is that what we need is some new vast complex subtle and comprehensive ideology more profound, more powerful than the Marxist ideology, because I think that in a very different sense from the sense in which it was urged around the end of the Cold War, we've reached the end of ideology.

I don't mean the end of ideology in Daniel Bell's sense. I mean the end of ideology in the sense of regarding ideology as that level of the mind which can comprehend the immensity of the psychic forces and of the sheer institutional, class, ethnic, and sexual forces that are now in play on what's going to become (pretty soon I think) a catastrophic level of spectacularity. I think that what we're about to undergo could very well be either the apocalypse or something as slow and as dangerous as a kind of vast, collective, communal cancer.

What I'm suggesting is that we need, both those of us who would have previously regarded ourselves as "the movement" and those of us who recognise the seriousness of the present position faced by the world in both the Third World and the developed countries, to get together on a new basis where the solidarity is based on things deeper than concurrence in an ideology or the sharing of a list of propositions or the being in some organisation rather than another organization.

It's not at all clear to me what precise form solidarity should take. All that I can say with any certainty is that it must be the interchange of people's autonomous creativity. This will mean far more respect for the differences between one another than we've had up till now and a far greater wariness about the subtler form of interpersonal domination.

This brings in immediately the whole flood of issues about race and sex and creed and ideology and class; (if we could put all that in brackets for a moment) I would say that I agree basically with the position that SMG is consistently putting forward and that is that we need to take over control of our own lives. What's happened is that people are alienated from their own lives, and there are any number of ways, any number of methodologies by which you can analyse that alienation, but what has to happen is people gradually and communally acting together come into greater and greater possession of their own autonomy.

Extend that until it becomes the sort of thing that the workers' control movement is working towards, the sort of thing that the self-management movement is working towards. Now there are stacks of unanswered questions in there about the relationship of all this to the class analysis, and about how it relates to Mao's slogan "learning from the people and teaching the people" but that I am quite sure is the direction in which we have got to go. We must go into an anti-authoritarian direction.

In fact, while I think that SMG has many, many weaknesses that at present they're making fairly strong efforts to overcome, I think that the one great strength of SMG to which I'd like to pay tribute is their persistence, the doggedness of their seriousness. What it brings to my mind is the fact that pretty soon after the Springbok tour (about 1972), although in many other parts of the world the common struggle that we'd all be engaged in escalated, in Australia it didn't seem to escalate. In Australia it seemed as though, having been constrained by ideologies that didn't properly interpret our experience, we all began to fragment and disintegrate, both as against one another and within our very selves.

So that according to our temperaments or inclinations or interests or weaknesses, or strengths even, we all took different directions. Some of us I think took the direction of an increasing loss of faith in our own ability to understand what was going on; at first an increasing kind of endurance of and then almost something you could perversely describe as enjoyment of, our own bewilderment. So that gradually, states of cynicism based on frustration, and nihilism, on profound ignorance of spiritual states that we'd never experienced before, began to grow.

You can find that by mixing long enough with people around the Royal Exchange (RE) and I'm not exempting myself from this and I'm not exempting many people I respect and admire intensely from this. I think it's so bad that we now carry the temptation to nihilism, the temptation to cynicism around with us. I can understand for the first time, I think, at least from my own personal point of view, how it was that Nazism and Fascism (for example), at the present moment in Europe could arise, and is arising on such a scale.

I think it does arise out of daily life; it does arise out of the frustration of deep energies, disconnection of deep energies from value systems that seem no longer to comprehend a person's experience or to interpret it. When this happens, I think people split in one of two ways. The whole trend is a kind of death trend but in a death trend there are what you might call the killers and the killed. There are the destroyers and the self-destroyed. And when I look about me and look at some of my own behaviour and the behaviour of some of my own friends, it seems to me that I see people who are caught in this kind of process of disintegration.

I'm talking about people who were intensely involved or even peripherally involved in the movement, but it doesn't matter, there are stacks of people around who are now in what seems to be a kind of a drift leading them to encourage, a split between the deeper part of themselves (which they're increasingly incapable of understanding) and the superficial part of themselves (which they think they're devoting to ends like hedonism, enjoyment, escape). They think they're devoting themselves to some of the very things that certain phases of the old movement celebrated as necessary and congratulated itself on as distinguishing it from the old left movement. You've got to inspect all this very carefully because if what's going on is the thwarting of profound energies then there are those who'll get sucked in when the real crack up begins to come. There are those who'll get sucked into the mindless destruction of valuable things all kinds of valuable things including persons.

There are those who are prey to the rise of powerful, fascist ideologies, powerful men who use their energy in a destructive way and there are those who'll get sucked into the sorts of states that other people prey on: the states of indifference, the states of need, and the states of a desire to hate. But the hate has no object so if a person can point out the object to them, the hate can be switched onto it.

And the object can change very rapidly, so the hate can change very rapidly. It puts me in mind of what George Orwell described in 1984 as Hate Week, when the enemy of the people, Emmanuel Goldstein, was flashed onto the television screen and the hate would rise to a frenzy. One week the enemy would be one of the countries they were opposed to, and

the next week that country would be their ally, but the hate would remain the same and would go on being poured out.

It might seem a long way from the Royal Exchange Hotel to Fascist rallies, to the anti-utopias of George Orwell but it seems to me that what we're learning the present period — as the ecological collapse continues as the collapse of the industrial mode of production continues, as the disproportion between the Third World and the advanced countries continues as madness increases in its many forms (but particularly in the developed countries) is that the gap is not so very wide between everyday life and Nazism.

One is the nightmare version of the daily life of the other; it's like the flipside of the daily life of one vast suburb of the world, like Australia. It seems to me that in a sense what disguises for Australians the real nature of their experience is the fact that we're probably the most suburban nation on earth. I only wish we could monitor the dreams of people in Australia and play them back on national radio and TV to them day after day so that they could see the horrifying shapes that are taking bodily and concrete form in other parts of the world; in Chile, in Italy where fascists are killing leftists and where leftists are responding with the necessary defensive violence, in Indonesia where 500,000 people were killed after the takeover, any number of other places where you'd care to mention.

We can't congratulate ourselves that Australia at least hasn't reached that stage, because we have reached that stage. It's just that the outbreak is taking different forms in different places.

I think it's no accident that there's so much preoccupation in the developed countries now among novelists, and psychiatrists and anti-psychiatrists and poets with the phenomena of madness and suicide, because that's what the cancer's like when it's got nowhere to go institutionally and has to go inside, down to the deeper structures of the personality.

I think that we're not interested enough, for example, in French intellectual movements other intellectual movements, like Structuralism in which I think we'd pretty rapidly find that the deep structures inside human beings, the things that structure human personality, have got intimate connections with the social structures of a society in which production is alienated, in which even suffering is now alienated from the people who produce and who suffer.

Bruce Dickson: If people who agree with you were to attempt to come to terms in some way with much of what you have said, how do you see them avoiding one possible outcome of doing this and that is: the psychological impact might just be too much for them, that is to say an appreciation of the depth or complexity of all the things that you've been talking about, might in itself make them lose any will before they get under way?

Yeah. That is a really interesting question because the first thing that flashed into my mind was a psychiatric expression: the general paralysis of the insane. I think there might be something called the paralysis of the supposedly sane and some people have already entered into that paralysis and for some it's a kind of necessary defensive mechanism.

If you look at what's happening to a lot of secondary school kids if you can believe what the younger Uni students tell you about their confreres ("*colleague*") or even about themselves, it sounds to me as if they've said "Look the rots gone so far and the attempt to deal with it in terms of analysis, and theoretical constructs is so obviously inadequate that we may as well lie down and either wait or try to go away mentally, into some kind of spiritual exile, while remaining here." Now that's the way I interpret some of what to some people might seem to be cynicism and apathy.

It seems to me that you can interpret some of these responses, especially by sensitive youngsters as a kind of anticipatory series of signals by some of the most responsive kind of spirits among the younger generation of the size of the chaos that they feel they haven't got either the intellectual or emotional equipment to deal with. That added to the fact that they know it's not going to improve if their elder brothers start to go to work and intellectually analyse it for them; they're preparing for some kind of liberation until the time when it really cracks up.

Editor: Because of problems relating to the transcription of Dan O'Neill's interview, his contribution does not proceed further, while complete to this point.

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