

A DECADE REVIEWED:

BEING REFLECTIONS AND PROPHECY UPON THE LONG MARCH OF THE RADICAL MOVEMENT WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY

By Way Of Introduction

Extract by Bruce Dickson from 'Introduction to Semper Floreat Interviews':

It should already be apparent that one of the great shortcomings of the (60's/70's) radical movement at Queensland University has been the failure or inability of its members to manifest in their own personal lives much of the sound and important values which it has proposed all others adopt. However I still believe that only a radical movement involving many people and offering genuinely humanistic and libertarian alternatives, is the answer to the advances being made by the oppressive and repressed "thinkers" of the right who currently control our lives.

The essence of the alternative view which a movement needs to offer is the understanding that the greatest human need is control of our own lives coupled with adequate opportunity for all to understand the real nature of the problems we will always face, and of how to overcome these. All social problems today can be more easily understood within this framework.

Control of our own lives (but not of others') cannot be achieved via a single victory. There will always be a need for humanity to overcome the potential "oppressor" lying within all of us and to constantly work at transformation of our society and ourselves.

For continuing success here, a radical movement needs to attempt to break down the mythology which blinds us, so as to leave us free to work for such a goal. The movement also needs to draw out in itself, and in others, the following human qualities: empathy, sensitivity, humility, faith in people and in reason, love and co-operation. The movement must be pro the collective egalitarian and communal spirit and anti the competitive spirit as well as selfishness, all forms of human oppression — particularly of one sex over the other, the false belief that our greatest pleasure is derived from wielding power (in any form) over others.

A preoccupation with ownership of material (or the more human) possessions, the consumer ethic, must be challenged also. The movement must exhibit consistency between its words and actions and also always seek to discover weaknesses in its theory and practice.

Any sense of elitism must not be present. Too often at UQ, those that felt they had established themselves as true 'radicals' or true 'feminists' could be discovered sneering at, or disregarding those other people who were still exhibiting 'bourgeois' characteristics, or who had only reached the 'reformist' stage.

What was always forgotten was that the level of consciousness of any person (including those in the movement) does not change overnight.

Radical thinkers are not necessarily born that way.

In my view, preoccupation with theory and too little concern with practice - or how social change based on those theories can be achieved - has been the greatest weakness of most sections of the radical movement in Queensland and Australia. (One possible exception here would be the Women's movement.)

Many people on campus have been so consumed by their desire to always think on what they regard as a high intellectual level, that they have become divorced to such an extent from what we experience every day that a connection cannot be found, and probably never will be found between their theories and any potential application of them.

Possibly their definition of what really constitutes intellectual thought should be re-examined occasionally. (On this point much can be learnt from Mao Tse-Tung's approach which is often attacked as being "anti-intellectual" when in fact it is anything but that within the context of Chinese society).

Most social theories, which are never put to the test of life — and I don't mean "reality" as defined by conservatives — are useless. Our universities are full of theories. Some are possibly very important but no radical attempts at their practice as yet, have occurred (i.e., attempts which did not conform to existing oppressive beliefs.)

If we were to place our faith in one of Marx's theories and all sit and wait for the collapse of capitalism supposedly to be brought about as a result of a crisis arising out of its inherent contradictions, we could all die of old age. Regardless of how bleak (or to some encouraging?) the economic situation appears to be for those in the West at present, it should be obvious from experience that capitalism usually avoids near (?) collapse because it has always been able to (by some means — oppressive or otherwise) adapt to the situation at the last minute to avoid defeat. Or alternatively, if this skill at "adaptability" (combined with co-option and manipulation of the people) were no longer able to be used successfully, the system can quite easily resort to its ultimate weapon viz., the immensely powerful social control mechanisms (violent or otherwise) it already possesses through its monopoly of technology and of the social sciences.

Couple the use of these with an obvious contempt on the part of the oppressive elements in control of the system, for other human life and human values, and where does this leave us? We are left taking the only "sane" course of action possible in the face of such, and that is setting out to appeal to the power of reason in the human race (subject to the prior destruction of the existing oppressive social mythologies which distort our reasoning capabilities), and to those better qualities presently lying repressed or unreleased within us. This is not easy.

However the only alternative to placing our faith and hopes in the ability of most human beings to change and transform themselves on a scale sufficient to regain control of their lives, is despair leading to madness.

As I have suggested the central question remaining (which is most often left untackled in any serious and intelligent way by the Left) is through what actions do we achieve such social change — change in values, in perception, and in lifestyle — which would lead to power being removed from our oppressors.

The development of such a theory of social action which would be rooted in our own Australian societal experience has never been adequately attempted. To understand what is really needed here, much can be learnt from Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (This book as Dan O'Neill has suggested in the past, should be essential reading for all students and staff.)

Freire sees "dialogue" between humans in order to "name" the world as the means to achieving liberation or what he calls "conscientization". (The term conscientization refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of society.) This is the basis of his dialogical theory of action.

"Dialogue is the encounter between wo/men, mediated by the world in order to name the world. Hence dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not want this naming — between those who deny other wo/men the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression.

If it is in speaking their word that men transform the world by naming it, dialogue imposes itself as the way in which men achieve significance as men. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity."

One barrier to be overcome to achieve maximum success through engaging in "dialogue" is the mythology fed to the people by the oppressive elements. Thus Freire argues that the task of revolutionary "leaders" is to pose as problems all the myths used by oppressor elites to oppress. However, at the same time, revolutionary leaders cannot believe in the myth of the ignorance of the people — *"they cannot believe that they and only they know anything — for this means to doubt the people"*, and have no "faith" in them.

Radical leaders and movements must not sloganize but must enter into dialogue with the community at large. *"The object of dialogical-libertarian action is not to 'dislodge' the oppressed from a mythological reality in order to 'bind' them to another reality. On the contrary, the object of dialogical action is to make it possible for the oppressed, by perceiving their adhesion, to opt to transform an unjust reality."*

Learning how to "name" the world must be done with the people and not for them if manipulation — the technique of the oppressor is to be avoided which it must be.

In my view the most important task that radical movements in Queensland have failed to tackle in a systematic way is the destruction of the current mythology. As Freire states *"in order for the oppressed to unite, they must first cut the umbilical cord of magic and myth which binds them to the world."*

I believe that only by doing this can they really see the world and really be in a position to perceive the alternative forms of society which are possible.

If radical movements try to present their concept of the ideal society to the people before they have destroyed the misconceptions (most often mass media generated) about the present society which are blinding the people, they are putting the cart before the horse.

An approach to social action is needed which first recognises the nature of the existing consciousness the particular society in which the movement exists. (As Freire suggests in order to adequately do this "*it is essential to have an increasingly critical knowledge of the current historical context, the view of the world held by the people, the principal contradiction of society, and the principal aspect of that contradiction.*"). Such a specific knowledge of a social experience cannot be imported from another society. To my knowledge no radical group (other than the feminist movement at times) in Australia has ever done this properly and this fact constitutes a fundamental failing. (The successes of the women's movement, in my view, have occurred because they have had this understanding and have created political programmes welded to the reality of many women and with which it is possible for women to identify.)

However, if the movement were to gain such a knowledge the next step would be to expose existing mythology and then offer to people the alternative of viewing their experiences in a broader context — a context which the radical movement would argue is more desirable and which is based on a non-oppressive, non-hierarchical, non-competitive view of humanity.

Ralph Nader has always adopted such a three pronged approach to achieving change and he (by contrast) has seen some success.

Many in the radical movement branded him as a "reformist" before he visited this campus to address students and staff some years ago. The truth was that Nader had an approach to social action which was highly intelligent and even "theoretically strong". That many of his critics on this campus later grasped this fact became clear on hearing their revised assessments of his position after he left.

One of the greatest misconceptions people suffer from in Australia is their view that politics plays a limited role in their lives (other than in the cost of living and level of their wages) and that consequently they are not interested in discussing it. This misconception provides a formidable barrier for a radical movement to tackle since if it is not destroyed any hint that what the movement is doing is of a political (e.g. 'communist') nature could alienate the person the movement wishes to undertake a dialogue with.

One solution (once the nature of the people's experience is understood) which has been and still is ignored too often by radical groups is to establish a starting point for the political dialogue with which the person in question can identify.

Radical students who have bothered to try using this approach have often been unsuccessful because they have been unable to fully appreciate the perspective in which the person they are talking to views the world. Alternatively in their attempt at a dialogue the radicals have failed to genuinely empathise with the other person.

Once the mythology has been destroyed (who has ever tried asking why China is not experiencing inflation — this fact alone must be worth unprejudiced contemplation), the next important stage as we have seen is the development of an awareness of the alternatives. To quote an example of how important just having the choice of an alternative view of the world can turn out to be — we can look at India — until the untouchables who were the lowest of the low in India's caste system were able to simply be presented with a new perspective which said "this doesn't have to be the way things are", they basically accepted the social system in operation as the way the world must be. That is, "reality." How many people in our society would realise that usury (profit making) in the middle ages was considered to be a cardinal sin? Sometimes the most simple alternatives in life are the hardest to grasp.

Adequate presentation and discussion of alternatives can be crucial to social change. Ralph Nader recognises this when he presents to the public thoroughly researched alternative information (something the radical movement knows very little about) on matters of concern to them. In doing so he weakens many of the public's previous beliefs (their faith in the big business and private enterprises, for example) and potentially causes them to question some broader possibilities. He also offers the prospect of actually experiencing some level of success (following effort at social action) to those people who would possibly be contemplating whether they should either let their fears of the world overcome them and escape via the Guru Maharaja Ji, thus accepting the false notion that the type of world we live in is not of our own making (see SMG leaflet "Fascism in the Counter Culture") or whether they should act on the world in an effort to change it.

In presenting alternatives and in creating a dialogue situation the radical movement must learn to fully utilize all those modes of communication open to it which are currently being used so successfully by oppressive elements against the people. A myth exists that in our "democratic" society choices do exist — the radical movement's efforts should be directed at ensuring that by presentation of alternative perspectives, choices really do exist. However these alternatives must be tempered by practice.

Mao Tse-tung long ago recognized the importance of Marx's "dialectic", when manifest in the form practice-theory-practice-theory-practice etc. Thought leading to action (praxis) is the principle that has seen little application amongst many radical groups — their lack of significant success should bear witness to the fact that in particular their theory of action is inadequate (if not their social theory itself.)

At university level when the activities of radical groups are examined critically it becomes clear that they have persistently failed to help convert the idealistic and critical thought of many first year students (who hold the mistaken belief that the radical movement at Uni is alive and well) into action. They have failed also to understand the "world view" of these young students and once again have failed to follow the necessary steps of destroying mythology and creating real alternatives.

Ralph Nader has pointed out that what many radical movements lack is a realization that achieving radical change involves hard work and a high degree of organization and that

persistence above all things will be called for. As Freire says "*radical leaders will not always win the immediate adherence of the people however what has not borne fruit at a certain moment and under certain circumstances is not thereby rendered incapable of bearing fruit tomorrow.*"

It is clear that the radical movement at UQ too often failed to learn from its mistakes (in these and other regards). Thus instead of being able to strengthen its resolve to evolve more sophisticated modes of thought and action, its failures only weakened its resolve.

It is my belief also that radical groups have yet to learn how to communicate what they have to say using terminology, or examples, which relate to the experience of those their words are directed at. Even when it is either not desired to, or not possible to, use different terminology fulfilling this criterion, then those words (often emotive words) which are used should always be explained properly or adequately defined. This is rarely done.

Nader's criticisms with which I fully concur were definitely applicable to the approach of the greater number of people involved in the radical movement of the Sixties at Queensland University. This movement (on those occasions when it did examine the failures of many of its actions) neglected to apply the vital principle that the problem to which you must first apply yourself is defined as whatever is found blocking your path.

In conclusion, I would like to once again quote Paulo Freire's obvious truth — "*Just as the oppressor, in order to oppress, needs a theory of oppressive action, so the oppressed in order to become free, also need a theory of action.*"

This theory of action once achieved also must be directed not purely at an intellectual elite (e.g. university students) but at the community at large — the people Queensland's radical movement has rarely been in contact with and has known very little about. "*Joining the oppressed requires going to them and communicating with them.*"

All that remains to be said is — why don't those of us who realise what is at stake and who desire change — "DO IT!"

Semper Floreat 1974

Volume 44, Number 16

Pages 19, 20 and 21.