

Social and Climate Justice: Fraternal Twins of the 21st Century

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William Blake's poem (1804-1808) :

And did those feet in ancient time

Walk upon England's mountains green:

And was the holy Lamb of God,

On England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,

Shine forth upon our clouded hills?

And was Jerusalem builded here,

Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold;

Bring me my Arrows of desire:

Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!

Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,

Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:

Till we have built Jerusalem,

In England's green & pleasant Land

Beneath the poem Blake inscribed an excerpt from the Bible: "Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets": Numbers chapter 11, verse 29.

Christopher Rowland, a Professor of Theology at Oxford University, has argued that this includes

“... everyone in the task of speaking out about what they saw. Prophecy for Blake, however, was not a prediction of the end of the world, but telling the truth as best a person can about what he or she sees, fortified by insight and an "honest persuasion" that with personal struggle, things could be improved. A human being observes, is indignant and speaks out: it's a basic political maxim which is necessary for any age. Blake wanted to stir people from their intellectual slumbers, and the daily grind of their toil, to see that they were captivated in the grip of a culture which kept them thinking in ways which served the interests of the powerful.” (Emphasis added)

The message we take from Blake has informed our struggles for social justice over the past sixty years whether they be around civil rights, gender equality, social inequality or anti-war struggles. But in the past two decades the Medusa of anthropogenic (man-made) climate change has reared its frightening head and is forcing us to look where previously we have averted our eyes. As we feel the changes, as we see because we are beginning to look, slowly a realization begins to take hold: all our struggles for social

justice have to be informed by a new one, the struggle for climate justice. Furthermore, they are more and more entwined.

But what do we mean by climate justice? It is an exhaustive topic, very well covered in Naomi Klein's new book that I urge people to read. In brief, it firstly means recognizing the truth and scope of the biological, physiological and geological changes engendered by our prolific use of fossil fuels over the past two centuries. Secondly, one must recognize that the overall warming, acidification of the oceans, the pollution of the air, seas and earth with the related negative effects on the reproductive cycles of all living things are and will continue to affect all of us but they will come down most heavily on the poor and working people worldwide. So our collective and global struggle for climate justice involves keeping fossil fuels (petroleum, natural gas, coal) in the ground. We can no longer afford the biological and atmospheric costs of extracting and burning these elements. We will have to aid the developing countries with various incentives to keep these fossil fuels underground or underwater. Most importantly, we must build up our collective structures of global resistance.

The suffocating ideology and practice of the so called free market system has to be identified as the most important culprit in the continuing degradation of our social and physical environment. The constant drive for profit accumulation is at the base of our problems; not just those relating to climate change but also to most of our social problems as well: inadequate public health and housing; privatization of the commons, for example, as in water and education; excessive militarization at the cost of lives and environmental degradation; unemployment and poverty wages married to overwork, and lastly, obscene inequality. Our so called democracies have become a cruel farce...we live in plutocracies and consequently they are riddled with both ethical and financial corruption. No wonder so many of us feel overwhelmed when confronting the continuing and increasing threat of climate changes. But as some have pointed out, perhaps that feeling of being overcome is also an expression of our ethical concerns, as only those who care can feel despair. How do we tap into those feelings in a way that leads to positive action? I will come back to that a little later in my talk.

1992 marked a year in which a series of climate conventions began, and are continuing to take place. In fact, one ended two day ago in Lima, Peru. At these conventions, political representatives of governments, along with participants from NGOs and some civil society attendees, get together to discuss climate change and actions that can be taken to ameliorate it. Most of the proposals reflect political "solutions" between governments that often need to be ratified at the national level. Much hand wringing is engaged in

and it is clear to any intelligent observer not totally blinded by free market ideology that the agreements made are wholly inadequate to deal with the scope of the problem. Many obvious actions, such as severely reducing the extraction of fossil fuels while simultaneously investing intellectually and financially in renewable sources of energy are not even seriously considered. After the political dust has settled, the pundits and the politicians, in their infinite wisdom, assure us that they have taken major, reasonable steps in addressing the problem. But isn't it wonderful (and incredibly painful) how one statistic can give the lie to all of the bloviating by our political punditocracy? Since these conventions began in 1992, emissions are up 57%. And the past several years, since the collapse of 2007-2008, emissions are increasing at an even more rapid rate than ever before. Let's take a moment to absorb that corrosive fact. Let's ask the blindingly obvious question: are these people, some of whom are most probably sincere, the ones to come up with the actions needed? Are they so blinded by free market ideology, so corrupted by the need to put everything in the matrix of cost-benefit analysis that they cannot really comprehend the scope of the problem nor the radical solutions needed? Do they not see the criminal inadequacy of their actions (or inactions)? I fear the answer is: yes. Can you imagine them struggling for the abolition of slavery or the curtailment of child labor while using moral and ethical arguments to do so? In fact, slavery and child labor are on the rise on their watch. In short, do they represent us and our concerns? All too often, our leaders are the standard bearers for the League of the Willfully Ignorant and Intellectually Corrupt. (Sadly, some of them are truly mentally deficient: just picture Donald Trump and Michelle Bachmann. On second thought, don't picture them...some things are best not imagined.)

A constant note being struck in mainstream discourse is the need for continuing austerity, austerity of course for the 99%. We must pay our collective debts, whether they are that of a laid off Greek hospital worker or a member of an indigenous tribe in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In order to do that we must foul the Greek countryside with toxic mining and the Amazon with oil extraction. But it is not just our Greek and Ecuadorian fellow humans who are suffering: all living things pay the price of the extraction, no matter where it occurs. And of course, the debt financing funds finds their way into the pockets of the usual suspects.

Have you noticed that along with being told of the necessity of austerity we are also told how important fracking and extracting oil from tar sands is to our future, to so called "energy independence"? Might they be two sides of the same coin, policies that insure super profits for the very few? Don't we

need to break the intellectual cage so many of us are in?

Of course, catastrophes are going to occur: more super storms, more droughts and associated famines and the continuing collapse of fish stocks. However, these catastrophes can become an opportunity to understand their underlying political-economic social causes and an opportunity to take action to force governments and corporations to keep fossil fuels in the ground. All too often, when catastrophes occur, we are told they are “acts of god”. In fact, usually they are nothing of the sort. This type of phraseology masks the human contribution to climate change over the past two hundred years. In fact, some scientists and commentators are using the phrase “the Anthropocene” to describe the age in which we are living: the two hundred years since humans have begun to extract and burn fossil fuels at an increasingly profligate rate. Unless we intellectually and politically challenge received wisdom and practices and unmask them we will find ourselves feeling hopeless in the face of the challenges confronting us. So how do we challenge our feelings of hopelessness or despair when we see Medusa guarding the path to our future? History can be a guide in this and we need only look back at the previous century and some of the recent struggles for social justice (many of you in this room were involved in them). After centuries of slavery and almost a hundred years of Jim Crow, the struggle for civil rights for African-Americans gained traction in spite of those preaching quiescence in the face of state power and institutional racism. Real gains for the lives of many were realized in this struggle. The Depression years in the U. S. saw tremendous fights that led to social legislation that all of us U. S. citizens benefit from today. Apartheid in South Africa was defeated through military and non-violent actions. Of course, all of these historic battles have the characterization of “two steps forward, one step back”. That is why we must be constantly vigilant and never rest; and that is why young people become the torch bearers in these fights and come up with new and creative ways to effect social change. We will need to follow their lead but we older folks are also the repository of knowledge of history and tactics that have been suppressed. We may not always be wise, but we often know more than we think.

There are real solutions to the climate crisis. They include stopping fossil fuels, building sustainable, community-based energy systems, steep reductions in carbon emissions, focusing on expanded public transit, transforming our food systems, and stopping deforestation. They are all contingent on creating and introducing democratic practices that go well beyond the electoral arena.

We can't achieve the above without a self-conscious political project.

Solidarity within and across political borders is necessary to tie social justice and climate justice struggles together, which are in fact born out of the same womb. We are nurtured by the same dream, the need to create a just and sustainable world.

For me, this dream is not realizable under capitalism. Its internal drive for accumulation/profits is at odds with nature that we humans are part of. We are not above nature, looking down upon it and viewing it as just another input in an economic calculation. We can't always be trying to yoke it to the plow of increasing GDP and expect it docilely to do our bidding. The natural world, our planet, has the last laugh. As Pogo has rightly said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us".

We have to resist and manufacture new forms of relating in our lives. We will have to create new political tactics that will be flexible but informed by constantly evolving strategies for change and democracy at all levels. Struggles for social justice and climate justice are part of all of us. Solidarity must be our watchword; but it is not just about solidarity with others. Solidarity is dynamic, is part of us, is with us. Solidarity is life affirming and softens the despair we feel at injustice and helps to take us out of the toxic aspects of our individuality. Solidarity is a form of love.

If we are not already, we will have to become one of Blake's prophets: not speaking of the end of the world (we all know that is coming, an echo of our own mortality) but awakening ourselves and others from an intellectual slumber. Let's take up our Arrows of Desire and ride our Chariot of Fire to build a new, green Jerusalem.