

Why are you crying?

Presentation to the Global Solidarity Summit

Panel 1: An Economy for Whom?

Hamburg, 5-6 July 2017

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The Corner House

In her book, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, Indian novelist and activist Arundhati Roy analyses the gross inequalities of wealth and power that characterize modern India, and indeed the rest of the world.

Trickle down of wealth from the rich to the poor, she says, has not worked; but Gush Up certainly has.

Globally, just 67 people – fewer than the number of people that would fit into a London double-decker bus – control as much wealth as the bottom half of the world's adult population.

Meanwhile, the average savings of an African-American woman are just \$100. And the poorest in the world are unlikely to have any savings at all.

Such extremes of wealth have not come about through accident.

They are a product of thousands of everyday acts of exploitation of humans and non-humans.

As Roy records, even the merely relatively-rich who make up the new middle class of India live side by side with the ghosts and poltergeists of capitalism – dead rivers, bald mountains and “the 800 million who have been impoverished and dispossessed to make way for us.”

These ‘ghosts of capitalism’ haunt not just India but the shiny new factories of China's free trade zones where low-waged workers produce iPads to make Apple's shareholders rich.

Their blood inks the international free trade agreements – from NAFTA to TTIP – that strip away labour rights and environmental controls.

They stalk the offices of the accountancy firms that pore over tax laws to create loopholes for their corporate clients.

They lurk within the trillions of dollars of derivatives contracts that magic money out of money.

They stalk the shores of the Greek Islands, where migrants seek desperately to seek safety and a better life.

And they rally to the cause wherever and whenever people struggle against oppression.

I would like to invite those ghosts to join our discussions today; and to propose a collective thought experiment.

What might these ghosts, these poltergeists, these spirits of capitalist oppressions say to us if they were here? What would they ask of us?

So here are some of the conversation that I think they would want us to have, not just today, but when tomorrow and in the weeks to come we talk to our friends, our work colleagues, our families, our neighbours and our political allies.

I think they would insist that inequality is a problem not of poverty but of riches.

That the wealth gap is no more than a measure of the extent to which elites have constructed means of extracting value from the rest of us.

And that the lethal oppressions that give rise to inequality will never be challenged unless our opposition is grounded in an understanding of how wealth is accumulated within society, and by whom.

I think they would treat talk of free markets creating a rising tide that will lift all boats as nothing more cruel cynicism.

As wilfully ignoring the fact that most people don't have a boat to be lifted – and that, without one, they will drown.

I think they would ask practical things of us – particularly those of us who have the luxury of time to research and the privilege of access to mass means of communication.

I think they would ask that we pay more attention in our work to exposing the mechanisms of wealth extraction.

I think they would ask us never to forget that capitalist accumulation rests on workers being paid for only a fraction of the value they create through their labour – and the owners of capital snaffling the difference.

I think that they would ask us to expose Neoliberalism's programmatic theft of workers' wages through the dismantling of union rights; the privatisation of health services, elderly care and social housing; and the enforcement of austerity policies.

And I think they would demand that we oppose, not accommodate, the many new forms of legalised looting – from Public Private Partnerships to carbon and ecosystem service trading – that capital is even now putting in place.

I think they would demand that we call out the World Bank's bullshit claims that Public Private Partnerships encourage efficiency and improve the lives of the poor.

I think they would insist that we expose the subsidies that PPPs provide to the already rich. That we expose the huge rates of returns – 20% or more – that private investors demand. And that we do not delude ourselves that the resulting inequalities

can be addressed through tack-on human rights and environmental safeguard standards.

I think that they would insist too that we go beyond progressive taxation as our response to inequality – necessary and critical as higher taxes may be.

I think they would clamour for us to dismantle the very engines that generate what the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda called “organised social misery”.

I think they would ask us to explore the connections between the many and various forms of oppression that we oppose.

And that they would welcome – not be scared by – an understanding of how these oppressions relate to conflicts between capital and labour.

In a word, I think they would ask us to develop a class-based response to inequality.

I think too that they would caution against seeking change through talking truth to power.

That they would be sceptical of the value of “reformist reforms” and would encourage us to look to “non-reformist reforms”.

And I say that because I think they would recognise the deep-rooted corruption of our current world system.

In examining that corruption, I think they would ask us to look beyond bribery, money-laundering and fraud – the focus of most anti-corruption campaigns.

I think they would want us to focus as much on everyday practices that decay, debase or otherwise deteriorate democratic politics – the essence of corruption.

Cue the steady stream of heads of industry, ex-Ministers and government officials that pass back and forth (quite legally) through the revolving doors between politics and business.

Cue the self-interested policy-making that, through privatisation, has transformed the provision of public services into publicly-guaranteed get-rich-quick for private investors and financiers.

Cue the “take, not make” playground that has been created for rent-seeking financiers, with the public picking up the tab when things go wrong.

I think that our ghosts would call our attention, with a passion born of experience, to often unacknowledged fact that many of these practices that are entirely lawful, routine and accepted.

That they now pass for “good governance”.

That some may even be deemed duties of office.

And that many – privatisation, for example – are the stated mission of public bodies.

I think they would ask us to question definitions that limit corruption to “the abuse of public office for private gain”.

That they would wryly point out that such definitions hides the many collusions between “public” and “private” that make most corruption possible.

I think they would ask us to question the public/private divide and focus instead on corruption as *anti-social* gain – that is, gain at the expense of the common good.

I think they would argue that corruption can only be understood in terms of its opposite: in terms, that is, of what is *not* impure, deviant, debased, tainted, disreputable, unscrupulous, venal, wicked, or any of the other common synonyms for “corruption”.

And that this, of necessity, requires us to develop a shared sense of what constitutes the “good society” and the “common good”.

And I think they would urge us organise for a politics that never sidelines this question.

And because the question can never be entirely settled, I think they would insist we take process seriously: Who decides? Whose voice counts?

I think they would remind us that democracy is not a spectator sport.

That it involves everyday practices.

That it demands that we challenge abusive power wherever and whenever we see it, whether in the home or the workplace or at a global level.

And that such challenges are not assisted by silo-ing our campaigns, or privatising them through “keep-off-my-turf” organisational “branding”.

I think they would ask us instead to make connections.

To practice solidarity, not as a vague expression of empathy or because we want others to join our campaigns – but as a process of mutual discovery of oppression, mutual discovery of strategies for confronting it and mutual support in doing so.

I think they would insist that such solidarity means taking sides.

I think too they would ask us not to look for “low hanging fruits” in our campaigns but to organise to make the seemingly “impossible” possible.

To expand, not accept, the political space in which we operate.

And I think they would ask us to recognise some harsh realities.

That a transformative response to the question ‘What is to be done?’ is unlikely emerge from forms of organising that ignore the dynamics of capital or treat it as a distraction.

That the starting point for most people is not “an economy for all” in the abstract but the multiple crises they face in their everyday lives.

That justice is not some tick-the-human-rights-box exercise. It is a process of an expression of a consciousness in the making.

That it is through this process discovery and the mutual recognition that arises from it that a new shared sense of 'We' is born.

And it this shared 'We' that make for class.

And, lastly, I think they would ask us to be brave in our organising – to have the courage to do things differently.

To recognise that, at this time of flux and crisis, many of the political institutions that have served struggles well in the recent past may not be capable of providing an effective challenge to capital in the future.

That neoliberalism has hollowed out of many of the cross-cutting, community-embedded networks of solidarity – from trade unions to working class political parties – that have historically provided the seedbeds for building mutuality and challenging accumulation.

And that the state is no longer an ally that can be relied upon to mediate conflicts between capital and labour.

But I think they would caution against simply trying to rebuild past institutions of working class opposition to capital.

I think they might encourage us to look elsewhere.

To look for emerging forms of organising *outside* of established politics – outside of polite society if you will – for clues to how to move forward.

I think our ghosts would point to consciousness-raising groups; to experiments in collective living and production; to efforts to build new forms of municipal ownership; to factory occupations; credit unions; to organising among unorganised labour; to the setting-up of solidarity health clinics in response to the slashing of public health budgets; and to alliances with those defending the sphere of social reproduction against the intrusions of capitalist forms of work.

And I would agree with them

I would end with one comment.

I do not know what "an economy for all" looks like.

I have a sense of its contours but that is all.

And I am certain that no single road map exists for getting from 'here' to 'there' because 'here' and 'there' are processes, not places.

And those processes will always be contested. There is no end of history.

But I know where I will look for allies and inspiration.

For me, our best hope for deflecting the lethal trajectory of capital lies in supporting, expanding and interweaving the numerous acts of commoning that daily assert the collective right of all, not just the few, to survival.

And the starting point of that journey of solidarity is unlikely to be, “We have this campaign. This is where you sign up. This is what you have to do to support us”. The starting point is more likely to be, “Why are you crying?”

Thank you.