This is an odd sort of book review. This week and next, we reprint excerpts from an essay by Patrick Reinsborough, one of the founders of the smartMeme collective, a group whose work we hold in very high regard. This original essay "Decolonizing The Revolutionary Imagination: Values Crisis, the Politics of Reality, and Why There's Going to Be a Common-Sense Revolution in This Generation," originally appeared in David Solnit (editor), Globalize Liberation (San Francisco: City Lights Book, 2004), pgs. 161-211.

The entire text of Patrick's essay can be found at http://www.smartMeme.com.

If you like what you read here, go out and buy this book because it is filled with other gems. Hats off to editor David Solnit for gathering the best of the best into this pathbreaking book.

Now listen to Patrick Reinsborough...

**Introduction: Post-Issue Activism**

Our planet is heading into an unprecedented global crisis. The blatancy of the corporate power grab and the accelerating ecological meltdown is evidence that we do not live in an era where we can afford the luxury of fighting merely the symptoms of the problem.

Analysis is the most important tool in the social change toolbox. It is this process of analysis -- the work to find the points of intervention and leverage in the system we're working to transform -- that suggests why, where, and how to use the other tools.

Many of us are impatient in our desire for change, and those of us from privileged backgrounds are oftentimes unschooled in the realities of long-term struggle.

I often recall the Buddhist saying, "The task before us is very urgent, so we must slow down."

The system we are fighting is not merely structural, it's also inside us, through the internalization of oppressive cultural norms that define our worldview. Our minds have been colonized to normalize deeply pathological assumptions. Thus, oftentimes our own sense of self-defeatism becomes complicit with the anesthetic qualities of a cynical mass media to make fundamental social change seem unimaginable.

All too often we project our own sense of powerlessness by mistaking militancy for radicalization and mobilization for movement building. It seems highly unlikely to me that capitalism will be smashed one window at a time.

Our revolution(s) will really start rolling when the logic of our actions and the appeal of our disobedience are so clear that they can easily replicate and spread far beyond the limiting definition of "protester" or "activist." To do so, our movements for justice, ecology, and democracy must deepen their message by more effectively articulating the values crisis underlying the corporate system. We must lay claim to life-affirming, common-sense values and expose one of the most blatant revolutionary truths of the modern era: The corporate-rule system is rooted in sacrificing human dignity and planetary health for elite profit, and it is out of alignment with human values.

This is the domain of post-issue activism -- the recognition that the roots of the emerging crisis lie in the fundamental flaws of the modern order and that our movements for change need to talk about redesigning the entire global system now. Post-issue activism is a dramatic divergence from the slow progression of single-issue politics, narrow constituencies, and Band-Aid solutions. Traditional single-issue politics, despite noble and pragmatic goals, is not just a strategic and gradualist path to the same goal of global transformation. Too often the framework of issue-based struggle needs to affirm the existing system in order to win concessions, and thus fails to nurture the evolution of movements for more systemic change.

Much of our social change energy is spent campaigning against the smoke rather than clearly alerting people to the fact that their house is on fire. Post-issue activism will not replace single-issue politics -- the people and ecosystems closest to the smoke need relief now -- but rather, it will strengthen ongoing struggles by providing a larger social-change context. Post-issue activism is the struggle to address the holistic nature of the crisis, and it demands new frameworks, new alliances, and new strategies. We must find ways to articulate the connections between all the "issues" by revealing the pathological nature of the system. To do so we must rise to the challenge of going beyond (rather than abandoning) single-issue politics. We have to learn to talk about values, deepen our analysis, and direct more resources into creating political space for a truly transformative arena of social change.

To think about decolonizing the revolutionary imagination, we must reference the history of colonization. Through colonization, Western civilization ("a disease historically spread by sharp swords"[1]) has been violently imposed upon the entire world. Colonialism is not just the process of establishing physical control over territory, it is the process of establishing the ideologies and the identities -- colonies in the mind -- that perpetuate control. Central to this process has been the manufacture of attitudes of racism, nationalism, patriarchal manhood, and the division of society into economic classes. If we are to take seriously the prospect of decolonizing the revolutionary imagination then we must examine how these attitudes shape the way we conceive of social change. Likewise, we must remember that analysis is shaped by experience, and that those who suffer directly as targets of these oppressive attitudes often live the experiences that create clear analysis. Let us not forget that effective revolutions are based on listening.
As we expand the realm of the possible we shape the direction of the probable. This means directly confronting the myths and assumptions that make a better world seem unattainable.

...[A]ll of these ideas are a work-in-progress. They are intended as tools to spark discussion and encourage debate, and it is my sincerest hope that they will generate more questions than they answer. Questions are always more radical than answers.

The Doomsday Economy

We live in a dangerous time, an urgent time, a time of profound crisis. Ecologically speaking it is an apocalyptic time defined by the sixth mass extinction of the earth's species,[2] the destruction of the last wilderness areas, and the forced assimilation of the planet's few remaining earth-centered cultures. Every ecosystem, every traditional culture, and every subsistence economy is on the chopping block as the global corporatizers force their consumer monoculture "development" model (read "antidevelopment") upon the entire world. Corporate capitalism's drive toward global domination has literally pushed the life support systems of the planet to the point of collapse.

Over the last few years, as corporate power has begun to undermine the economic self-determination and political sovereignty of even the over-consumers of the global North, resistance has grown more visible in the heart of it all -- the United States. Unprecedented coalitions have formed, and different movements have been uniting in creative mass protest to slow the pace of corporate globalization. But slowing things down is one thing, replacing the doomsday economy with a democratic, just, and ecologically sane world is another.

The global system is mutating. Although it remains deeply rooted in its history of colonial genocide, corporate power grabs, and ecological devastation, the structure has changed dramatically over the past generation. The biggest shift has been the rise of the speculative economy. As the world financial sector has been deregulated, with many countries forced to drop limits on investment, there has been a dramatic transition in economic priorities from the production of real goods to a global casino economy based on high-risk, short-term speculation. In 1986 the world's foreign exchange markets were handling nearly $200 billion a day. By 1998 this figure had grown eightfold to $1.5 trillion dollars every day.[3] Since the entirety of world trade is estimated to be worth about US $6.5 trillion a year,[4] that means that five days of currency transactions surpasses the value of an entire year of world trade. But the most important aspect of this so-called "financial revolution" is that the massive numbers represent growth in the speculative sector of the economy. Financial speculation has accelerated to the point that by the year 2000, for every $1 of international investment facilitating trade in real goods, $9 were being spent on short-term speculation.[5]

Once we cut through the numbers games and semantics we recognize that what economists call economic growth is really the liquidation of the natural wealth of the planet. Almost literally, they are destroying the natural economy of living forests to make an economy of disposable paper on which they print money to tell themselves how rich they are. It is a true doomsday economy, incapable of seeing the natural systems that sustain life as anything other than resources to be extracted. The flawed accounting of the speculative economy hides the horrible truth that what the corporate globalizers call "progress" is really the earth's going-out-of-business sale.

Our strategies must be informed by the fact that we're not fighting that colloquialism once called in activist parlance "The Man" -- these days we're fighting "The Machine." This machine is the culmination of the pathological world-view that has hard-wired patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalist domination, and ecological illiteracy into the global operating system. The rich, white (self-congratulatory) men who have always benefited from global domination continue to do so, but ultimately they have created a runaway machine that is beyond even their own control.

We don't have to convince people that something is wrong -- as corporate control becomes more blatant and the ecological crisis worsens, the system is doing much of the work to discredit itself. We must, however, help people to imagine alternatives that go beyond tinkering with the symptoms to actually dismantling and redesigning the global system.

Corporations are not wealth-generating machines as the American mythology would have us believe, but rather wealth-consolidating machines. Corporations extract the biological wealth of the planet, liquidating our collective natural heritage in order to enrich a tiny minority. The corporate drive to shorten the planning horizon, externalize costs, and accelerate growth has pushed the life support systems of the planet to the brink of collapse.

The Control Mythology: Consume or Die

Most people who live outside the small overconsumption class can't help but be aware of the system's failings. But for the majority of American (and more generally, global North) consumers the coercion that keeps them complicit with the doomsday economy is not physical; it is largely ideological, relying heavily on the mythology of America. It is this mythology that buys people's loyalty by presenting a story of the world that normalizes the global corporate takeover.

In this story, America is the freest country in the world and corporate capitalism is the same as democracy. The interests of corporations are represented as serving popular needs -- jobs being the simplistic argument -- and the goal of U.S. foreign policy is presented as a benevolent desire to spread democracy, promote equality, and increase standards of living. This control mythology prevents people from seeing how pathologized the global system has become. Much of this story is merely crude propaganda that relies on Americans' notorious ignorance about the world, but elements of the control mythology have become so deeply imbedded in our lives that they now define our culture. Among the most deep-seated elements of the control mythology is the ethic of an unquestioned, unrestrained right to consume. Consumerism is the purest drug of the doomsday economy. It epitomizes the pathology -- the commodification of life's staples and the human and cultural systems that have been created to sustain collective life.

Articulating the Values Crisis
Ultimately, our society must shift collective priorities and engage in a values shift to overcome some of our deepest pathologies such as patriarchy, fear of "otherness," and alienation from nature. However, we must be very careful how we frame this concept. Picture yourself knocking on the country's front door and announcing that you have come to shift people's values. Slam! In fact, this is far too often the way that activists are perceived.

An alternative strategy for a first step is to articulate the values crisis. This means speaking to people in terms of their basic values and showing them that the global system that is engulfing them is out of alignment with those values. In other words we have a "values crisis," a disconnect between what kind of world people want to live in and the corporate world that is rapidly taking over.

The emerging global justice movements are already laying claim to core values such as democracy, justice, diversity, and environmental sanity as part of an inclusive vision of a life-affirming future. Now our work is to expose the flawed values of the corporate takeover.

We can articulate the values crisis by showing people that corporate capitalism is no longer grounded in common-sense values. The corporate paradigm is a cancerous perversion that masquerades as being reflective of commonly held values while it writes the rules of the global economy to metastasize corporate control across the planet.

A simple dichotomy for articulating the crisis is the clash between a delusional value system that fetishizes money and a value system centered around the biological realities of life's diversity.[7]

**Framing the Debate**

Movements aren't about tactics -- take this street corner, blockade that corporate office -- movements are about ideas. Movements are about changing the world. When we say a better world is possible, we mean it. We want a world that reflects basic life-centered values. We've got the vision and the other side doesn't. We've got biocentrism, organic food production, direct democracy, renewable energy, diversity, people's globalization, and justice. What have they got? Styrofoam? Neoliberalism? Eating disorders? Designer jeans, manic depression, and global warming?

...[O]ur campaigns and actions must tell inclusive, provocative stories that create space for people to see themselves in the story. We must tell the story of the values crisis. Our stories must make people take sides -- are you part of the sickness or are you part of the healing? Are you part of the life-affirming future or are you part of the doomsday economy?

The first step is to separate dissent from the self-righteous tone that many people associate with protest. This tone can be particularly strong in activists from privileged backgrounds who are invested in visible "defection" as a way to validate their resistance. These politics of deflection by their very nature create obstacles to communicating with the mainstream and frequently rely on symbols of dissent and rebellion that are already marginalized.

We need to be training ourselves to become "meme warriors"[8] and to tell the story of values crisis in different ways for different audiences. We must get a better sense of who
our audiences are, and target our messages to fit into their existing experiences.

It's essential that we frame our ideas in such a way that as people wake up to the crisis they have the conceptual tools to understand the systemic roots of the problem. Over the next decade as the global crisis becomes more visible we won't have to do much to convince people about the problem. Rather, our job will be to discredit the elite's Band-Aid solutions and build popular understanding of the need for more systemic solutions.

Whether we are talking about biological contamination, financial collapse, or nuclear meltdowns, if we haven't framed the issue in advance, even the most dramatic breakdowns in the system can be "crisis-managed" away without alerting the public to the system's fundamental failings. But if we do the work to challenge the control mythology and undermine the flawed assumptions, then people will know whom to blame. As we build a public awareness of the values crisis it helps shift the debate away from inadequate reforms and toward redesigning the global system.

This is the strategy of leap-frogging, or framing our issues in such a way that they force the public debate to "leap" over limiting definitions of the problem and elite quick-fixes to embrace systemic solutions. For example, instead of debating how many parts per million of pollution regulatory agencies should allow in our drinking water, we can challenge the right of industrial interests to poison us at all. An effective framing forces questions to be asked about the upstream polluters -- do we need their product? If so, how can we make it in a way that doesn't pollute? In order to successfully leapfrog colonized imaginations and entrenched power-holders, we must have the skill and courage to articulate real solutions that avoid concessions that dead-end in inadequate reforms.

There are any number of macroissues that when framed correctly can help us name the system. Global warming, commodification of basic human needs from health care to water, the rate of technological change, systemic racism, the spread of genetic pollution, ongoing violence against women -- these are just a few examples that can tell the story of the values crisis. The challenge is not what issue we work on but how we avoid becoming trapped in the limiting framework of single-issue politics.

Direct Action at the Point of Assumption

As we endeavor to link systemic change with tangible short-term goals we must seek out the points of intervention in the system. These are the places where when we apply our power -- usually through revoking our obedience -- we are able to leverage change.

How can we sidestep the machine and challenge the mentality behind the machine? In other words, we need to figure out how to take direct action at the point of assumption. Targeting assumptions -- the framework of myths, lies, and flawed rationale that normalize the corporate takeover -- requires some different approaches from actions at the other points of intervention. Point-of-assumption actions operate in the realm of ideas and the goal is to expose pathological logic, cast doubt, and undermine existing loyalties. Successful direct action at the point of assumption identifies, isolates, and confronts the big lies that maintain the status quo. A worthy goal for these types of actions is to encourage the most important act that a concerned citizen can take in an era defined by systematic propaganda -- questioning!

Direct action at the point of assumption is a tool to decolonize people's revolutionary imaginations by linking analysis and action in ways that reframe issues and create new political space. Whether we're deconstructing consumer spectacles, exposing the system's propaganda, or birthing new rhetoric, we need actions that reveal the awful truth -- that the intellectual underpinnings of the modern system are largely flawed assumptions. Direct action at the point of assumption is an effort to find the rumors that start revolutions and ask the questions that topple empires. [To be continued.]

[2] The sixth mass extinction has become a widely accepted term within scientific circles to describe the current period of extinction. Dr. Niles Eldredge, the curator in chief of the permanent exhibition "Hall of Biodiversity" at the American Museum of Natural History, has an article "The Sixth Extinction" available at www.amnh.org, June 2001. Also see Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson's work.
[7] The contrast of money values versus life values is widely used. For a particularly eloquent articulation of it check out the books or lectures of Global Exchange co-founder Kevin Danaher. Most are available through www.globalexchange.org. Also useful is the work of David Korten, particularly The Post-Corporate World: Life After Capitalism (Kumarian Press, 1999).
[8] The term "meme warriors" was coined by Kalle Lasn in Adbusters Magazine and is expounded upon in his book Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Consumer Binge and Why We Must (New York: HarperCollins, 2000). Despite its militarist connotations, the term is intended to be gender neutral.

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