Continuing from last week our celebration of the book, Globalize Liberation (San Francisco: City Lights Book, 2004), edited by David Solnit.

We are celebrating this book by reprinting excerpts from one of its major essays, "Decolonizing The Revolutionary Imagination: Values Crisis, the Politics of Reality, and Why There's Going To Be a Common-Sense Revolution in This Generation," by Patrick Reinsborough.

The entire text of Patrick's essay can be found at http://www.rachel.org/library/getfile.cfm?ID=508

If you like what you read here, go out and buy Globalize Liberation. It may give you some new ideas about how to view your own work in relation to this troubled world.

Now, here is more from Patrick Reinsborough...

Our movements need to contest the corporate monopoly on meaning. We must create point of assumption actions that go beyond merely jamming the control mythology to actually substituting transformative, life-affirming stories. Culture jamming has largely been applied like a wrench to disable the brainwashing infrastructure of corporate consumerism. We must supplement the wrench with the seed by planting new, transformative stories that use the information-replicating networks of modern society to grow and spread. Our actions must create image events and launch designer memes with the power to supersede the controlling mythologies of consumer culture, the American empire, and pathological capitalism.[1]

What would this look like? What are the big lies and controlling myths that hold corporate rule in place? Where are the points of assumption? How can we exploit the hypocrisy between the way we're told the world works and the way it actually works in order to name the system, articulate the values crisis, and begin decolonizing the collective imagination? These are all questions for our movements to explore together as we challenge ourselves to be pragmatic idealists, calculating provocateurs, and revolutionary dreamers.

Let's ask ourselves how our resistance can galvanize antiwar sentiments into a deeper movement for fundamental change that articulates the values crisis -- the disconnect between the values of empire and the values that ordinary Americans hold.

Beware the Professionalization of Social Change

The worst thing that can happen to our movements right now is to settle for too little.

But tragically that is exactly what is happening. We are largely failing to frame the ecological, social, and economic crisis as a symptom of a deeper values crisis and a pathological system. Thus, many of the modest visions of social change being put forward seem incapable of even keeping pace with the accelerating global crisis, let alone providing true alternatives to the doomsday economy.

Too many of our social change resources are getting bogged down in arenas of struggle that can't deliver the systemic shifts we need. Most of the conventional venues for political engagement -- legislation, elections, courts, single-issue campaigns, labor fights -- have been so co-opted by elite rule that it's very difficult to imagine how to use them for strategies that name the system, undermine the control mythology, or articulate values crisis from within their limited parameters.

One of the most telling symptoms of our colonized imaginations has been the limited scope of social change institutions. Most social change resources get directed toward enforcing inadequate regulations, trying to pass watered-down legislation, working to elect mediocre candidates, or to win concessions that don't threaten the corporate order. One of the main reasons that so many social change resources get limited to the regulatory, electoral, and concessionary arenas is the fact that much of social change has become a professionalized industry. The NGO -- nongovernmental organization -- a term made popular by the United Nations policy discussion process, has become the most familiar social change institution. These groups are frequently made up of hard-working, underpaid, dedicated people, and NGOs as a group do a great deal of important work. However, we must also acknowledge that generally the explosion of NGOs globally is a loose attempt to patch the holes that neoliberalism has punched in the social safety net. As government cedes its role in public welfare to corporations, even the unprofitable sectors have to be handed off to someone. A recent article in the Economist revealingly explains the growth of NGOs as "... not a matter of charity but of privatization."[2]

Just as service-oriented NGOs have been tapped to fill the voids left by the state or the market, so have social-change NGOs arisen to streamline the chaotic business of dissent. Let's call this trend NGOism, the belief -- sometimes found among professional "campaigners" -- that social change is a highly specialized profession best left to experienced strategists, negotiators, and policy wonks. NGOism is the conceit that intermediary organizations of paid staff, rather than communities organizing themselves into movements, will be enough to save the world.

This very dangerous trend ignores the historic reality that collective struggle and mass movements organized from the bottom up have always been the springboard for true progress and social change. The goal of radical institutions -- whether well-funded NGOs or gritty grassroots groups -- should be to help build movements to change the world. But NGOism institutionalizes the amnesia of the colonized imagination and
presents a major obstacle to moving into the post-issue activism framework. After all, who needs a social movement when you've got a six-figure advertising budget and "access" to all the decisionmakers?

As a consequence, strategies often get locked into the regulatory and concessionary arenas -- focused on "pressure" -- and attempt to redirect existing power rather than focusing on confronting illegitimate authority, revealing systemic flaws, and building grassroots power.

The mythology of American politics as populist or democratic is rapidly being undermined by the blatant realities of corporate dominance. As people's confidence in the facade of popular rule (like voting, lobbying, and the regulatory framework) has waned, more and more campaigns are directly confronting destructive corporations. This is an essential strategy for revealing the decision-making power that corporations have usurped, but unfortunately most of these NGO-led efforts to confront individual destructive corporations are failing to articulate a holistic analysis of the system of corporate control.

This is an extremely dangerous failure because in pursuing concessions or attempting to redirect corporate resources we risk making multinational corporations the agents of solving the ecological crisis. This is a flawed strategy since by their very nature corporations are incapable of making the concessions necessary to address the global crisis. There is no decision-maker in the corporate hierarchy with the power to transform the nature of the corporate beast and confront its identity as a profit-making machine. The CEO who has an epiphany about the need to redefine her corporation as a profit-making machine. The CEO who has an epiphany about the need to redefine her corporation as a democratic institution that looks beyond the limited fiduciary interests of shareholders will find herself on the wrong side of a century of corporate law. We need to avoid the temptation to accept concessions that legitimize corporate control and obscure the fundamental democracy issues underlying the global crisis.

Too often, political pragmatism is used as an excuse for a lack of vision. Pragmatism without vision is accepting the rules that are stacked against us while vision without pragmatism is fetishizing failure. The question shouldn't be what can we win in this funding cycle but rather how do we expand the debate to balance short- and long-term goals? Like a healthy ecosystem, our movements need a diversity of strategies. We need to think outside the box and see what new arenas of struggle we can explore.

This is not to say that corporate campaigns and winning concessions is merely "reformist" and therefore not important. The simplistic dichotomy of reform versus revolution often hides the privilege of "radicals" who have the luxury of refusing concessions when it's not their community or ecosystem that is on the chopping block. A more important distinction is which direction is the concession moving toward? Is it a concession that releases pressure on the system and thereby legitimizes illegitimate authority? Or is it a concession that teaches people a lesson about their collective power to make change and therefore brings us closer to systemic change?

Whether reliant on a membership base or institutional funders, NGOs are often forced to build a power base through self-promotion rather than self-analysis. Not only does this dilute their agendas to fit within the political comfort zone of those with resources, it disrupts the essential process of acknowledging mistakes and learning from them. This evolutionary process of collective learning is central to fundamental social change, and to have it derailed by professionalization threatens to limit the depth of the change that we can create.

When a system is fundamentally flawed there is no point in trying to fix it -- we need to redesign it. That is the essence of the transformative arena -- defining issues, reframing debates, thinking big. We must create the political space to harness the awareness of the increasingly obvious global crisis into a desire for real change toward a democratic, just, and ecologically sane world.

Our movements must evolve past mere mobilizing and into real transformative organizing. Transformative organizing is more than just making the protest louder and bigger. It's the nuts-and-bolts business of building alternatives on a grassroots level, and creating our own legitimacy to replace the illegitimate institutions of corporate society. Real transformative organizing gives people the skills and analysis they need to ground the struggle to reclaim our planet in both the individual and the structural arenas -- the creation of new identities and the transformation of global systems.

It is essential that we don't waste all our energy just throwing ourselves at the machine. Resistance is only one piece of the social change equation. It must be complemented by creation. Movements need institutions that can be the hubs to help sustain our momentum for the long haul. There are definitely NGOs that play this role well, we just have to ensure that NGOism doesn't infect them with limiting definitions of specialization and professionalism. We have to plant the seeds of the new society within the shell of the old. Exciting work is being done around the concept of dual-power strategies. These are strategies that not only confront illegitimate institutions, but simultaneously embody the alternatives, thereby giving people the opportunity to practice self-governance and envision new political realities. Examples of inspiring dual-power strategies are taking place across the world, particularly in Latin America. [For comprehensive writings, discussions, and organizing around the dual power concept, check out www.dualpower.net.]

"Reality" is the lens through which we see the world. If we want to create a different world we're going to need to create some new lenses. We can begin by understanding that the values that currently underlie the global system didn't win out because they are time-tested, democratically supported, or even effective. This "reality" is a product of the naked brutality of European colonization and the systematic destruction of the cultural and economic alternatives to our current pathological system.

At the center of these efforts must be the understanding that the ecological operating systems of the biosphere represent an overarching politics of reality. If we want to talk about reality in the singular, outside of its conceptual quotation marks,
then we must talk about ecological reality -- the reality of interdependence, diversity, limits, cycles, and dynamic balance. A politics of reality recognizes that ecology is not merely another single issue to lump onto our list of demands; rather, ecology is the larger context within which all our struggles take place. A politics of reality is grounded in the understanding that the ecological collapse is the central and most visible contradiction in the global system. It is an implicit acknowledgment that the central political project of our era is the rethinking of what it means to be human on planet earth.

The Western Shoshone people -- the most bombed nation on earth who have survived half a century of U.S. nuclear colonialism on their ancestral lands in what is now called Nevada -- have mobilized under the banner, "Healing Global Wounds." This inspiring slogan reminds us that despite the horrors of brutality, empire, and ecological catastrophe the strongest resistance lies in the ability to think big.

In facing the global crisis, the most powerful weapon that we have is our imagination. As we work to escape the oppressive cultural norms and flawed assumptions of the corporate system we must liberate our imagination and articulate our dreams for a life-affirming future. Our actions must embody these new "realities" because even though people might realize they are on the Titanic and the iceberg is just ahead, they still need to see the lifeboat in order to jump ship. It is by presenting alternatives that we can help catalyze mass defections from the pathological norms of modern consumer culture.[3] Our job is to confront the sickness while articulating the alternatives, both ancient and new. Our true strength lies in the diversity of options presented by earth-centered values, whether we find the alternatives in the wisdom of traditional cultures, local economies, spiritual/community renewal, or ecological redesign. As we decolonize our own revolutionary imagination we will find new political frameworks that name the system and articulate the values crisis. We can base our work in an honest assessment of our own privilege, and a commitment to healing historic wounds. We can imagine a culture defined by diversity that promotes revolutionary optimism over nihilism and embraces collective empowerment over individual coercion. Not only can we redefine what is possible, but we must!

We are already winning. Life is stronger than greed. Hope is more powerful than fear. The values crisis is in full swing, and more and more people are turning their back on the pathological values of the doomsday economy. The global immune system is kicking in and giving momentum to our movements for change. Call it an Enlightenment. Call it a Renaissance. Call it a common-sense revolution. The underlying concepts are obvious. As the saying goes -- for a person standing on the edge of a cliff, progress must be defined as a step backward.

Imagination conjures change. First we dream it, then we speak it, then we struggle to build it. But without the dreams, without our decolonized imaginations, our efforts to name and transform the system will not succeed in time.

I take inspiration from a slogan spray-painted on the walls of Paris during the springtime uprising of 1968: "Be realistic. Demand the Impossible!" The slogan is more timely now than ever...

[1] Many of these strategies around "image events" and applying the elements of narrative structure to "telling the future" have been further developed by the smartMeme strategy and training project in their essays "The Battle of the Story" and "The Next Environmental Movement." These essays and an ongoing forum for activists to explore and apply these ideas are available at www.smartmeme.com.


[3] I am indebted to my conversations with Kevin Danaher for the lifeboat metaphor.