

# **An Aisling for Our Age**

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What is my aisling for our age? In the classical manner, shall I lament of the current state of our society and prophesy an imminent revival of our fortunes? Certainly I can lament, if not prophesy. I can look to the future, but it would not be to speak of an imminent revival.

We are told that, if we comply with the will of the masters of the universe and the strictures they have decreed upon us, that all will be well, if not imminently, then eventually. I think not. My dream does not flow in this direction.

So what is my vision for the world? I could speak of truth, justice, peace, community. I hear people float these words on a cloud of abstractions, as if they were pure platonic forms. I can speak only of the real flow of history in our times, where such truth, justice, peace and community as we find are increasingly marginal in a world of delusion and deceit, intensifying injustice, class war of the rich and powerful upon the rest and severe erosion of community.

Why? There are causes on many levels, but there is no point at going on about proximate causes and intermediate levels, about bad apples or even past and present governments, while ignoring the nature of the global system that structures our lives. If we do not see the core cause of our condition, our vision will be myopic and our aislings will be only empty aspirations that fail to address the socio-historical conditions for the realisation of our aspirations, that fail to confront the political economy circumscribing our scope to seek truth, justice, peace, community.

I'm a philosopher, not an economist, but I've learned that philosophy is shaped by political economy in many ways and on many levels. For a start, who can be a philosopher? One day I was in South Africa travelling from Rondebosch to Stellenbosch for a philosophy conference and passing through the Cape Flats, a world where people live in shacks made of rubbish, babies get bitten by rats, where children are electrocuted at play tripping over pirated electricity cables. I asked what chance to be a philosopher had some girl running around Khayelitsha that morning compared to some boy in Rondebosch or Stellenbosch, capturing in one image the inequities of gender, race and class, but mostly class. Then, I asked myself, if she should get to university to study philosophy, what kind of philosophy would she find there or would philosophy still be there at all? I could speak this way of most other countries, but I use South Africa as a place where a liberation movement has come to power and a communist can be minister of education to highlight the power of the global forces that bear down upon philosophy and all else.

The philosophy that has prevailed in our universities, varieties of neopositivism and postmodernism, have served the hegemony of the system in their opposite, but oddly converging, ways. They have both undermined systemic thinking. It is a paradox. Never has there been such a systematising force as contemporary global capitalism and yet never has there been such inhibition of systemic thinking. The

centralising market decentres the psyche. It organises production and consumption, but disorganises community. It makes it possible for many to consume beyond the wildest dreams of their ancestors, but it leaves many more outside its malls, its gated communities, its 5 star restaurants. It strips public space and destroys social solidarity.

Parasitic elements thrive effortlessly, consuming what they do not produce, while primary producers toil like Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill, producing more and more to consume less and less. The masters of the universe award themselves astronomical bonuses and bankrupt companies, leaving in despair and even destitution those who have produced the wealth they have stolen and squandered. They leave others stranded at the starting line. This process of accumulation by dispossession is accelerating.

The invitation to speak at this event quoted the President of Ireland speaking of a 'dream of a better, kinder, happier, shared world'. This cannot come about by proceeding as we are. A world in which the mysterious market prevails over all other social ties cannot generate a society in which we can live meaningfully with one another. Capitalism undermines the very foundations of rationality and sanity and morality. It has colonised, not only our economy, but our government, our media, our universities, our common sense. It has made itself seem as inevitable as air. Even now, when it is manifestly failing, even in its own terms, never has any alternative to it seemed further away.

According to *Proverbs*, where there is no vision, the people perish.

My vision is for a society where people can see the system for what it is and act to transform it in the direction of an alternative system, a society where the 99% rise up against the 1% and take back the world they have stolen from us, a society based the principle: from each according to their abilities, to each according to their work and needs.

It is socialism or barbarism. Looking to the current balance of forces, the odds are on barbarism. But I still hope for socialism.

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