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After the disaster
Guest editorial by Keith Hart

Thirty years ago I was discussing the state of the world with a radical philosopher at Yale. She dismissed the Americans of course, the Russians, British, Germans, Chinese and Japanese too. So I asked her where in the world she looked to for hope. And she said ‘Mozambique’, then and now a plucky little country struggling against capitalist imperialism in darkest Africa. Mozambique qualified because it was insignificant and far away. She knew nothing of the place personally, but it offered a measure of hope without compromising her bleak picture of the world she lived in.

Naomi Klein’s The shock doctrine (2007) likewise presents a monolithic account of ‘neoliberalism’ that leaves room for a solution only at the margins. Her account, which comes endorsed by many radical literati including John Le Carré, Arundhati Roy and John Berger, starts with the ‘Chicago Boys’ in Latin America’s Southern Cone during the early 1970s. She covers much the same ground as David Harvey in A brief history of neoliberalism (2007). Harvey draws a contrast between the ‘embedded liberalism’ of the welfare state consensus from the 1940s to the 1970s and the ‘disembodied’ markets that followed; Klein speaks of neoliberalism as a ‘counter-revolution’. Both cover the last three decades or so without attempting to place them in any larger analysis of modern world history. Harvey speculates about inflationary and deflationary routes out of neoliberalism, but Klein appears to see no end to it.

Both authors try to tell One Big Story, the restoration of capitalist power by Reagan and Thatcher (with peripheral support from Pinochet and Deng), but Klein extends hers to include a string of disasters since the millennium (September 11th, the invasion of Iraq, the tsunami, Hurricane Katrina). She represents this sequence as a wholesale looting of public assets by corporate interests in the name of Milton Friedman’s free market doctrine. ‘Disaster capitalism’ generates and feeds off ‘economic shocks’ and these seem to be multiplying since the time when ‘structural adjustment’ imposed brutal economic medicine on weak governments. Klein links the CIA’s revival of torture to an earlier history of electric shock treatment, drawing an evocative analogy between individual and collective loss of memory.

After the dictators, Klein’s narrative takes in the economic warfare launched under quasi-legal auspices in Bolivia, Poland, China and South Africa. Thatcher’s revolution was rescued by success against the Argentine generals. Russia’s wealth was handed over to the ‘oligarchs’ for a pittance and then the IMF organized a boot sale of Southeast Asian assets to Western corporations. And Israel’s coercive treatment of the Palestinians and Lebanon remains a laboratory for neoliberal repression everywhere. Developments within the United States all point in the same direction.

Does she see any hope of something else, born perhaps of popular resistance to this class warfare? A concluding chapter of two dozen pages (out of more than 500) addresses ‘the rise of people’s reconstruction’. Neoliberalism’s nemesis is – wait for it – Evo Morales! Hezbollah! Factory and farm co-ops in Argentina and Brazil! The French and Dutch rejection of the European constitution (the only reference to the EU in the whole book)! And Chávez of course. As people sort among the rubble of their societies, the final sentence tells us that ‘they are building in resilience – for when the next shock hits’. Naomi Klein’s

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totalizing vision of the contemporary world renders these scraps of resistance merely symbolic.

If neoliberalism is a counter-revolution, what was the revolution it overthrew and when did it take place? Perhaps there has been more than one of each. Now that the neoliberal era is manifestly running up against its own contradictions, answers to such questions are vital to any assessment of the prospects for a better world.

In retrospect, the peoples of the world made remarkable gains in freedom and equality after 1945, when they rejected the society that had given them two world wars and the Great Depression. This involved not only the formation of industrial states committed to democratic provision of employment, education, health and transport, but the dismantling of European empire by an anti-colonial revolution, first in Asia, then in Africa. The Cold War, in its own way, was a counter-revolution against all that, and in Afghanistan, Nicaragua and Southern Africa it took the form of dirty wars (precursors of the ‘war on terror’) long after Friedman’s experiments in free-market dictatorship had been launched. A second revolution came with the collapse of the Soviet Union and apartheid in the early 90s, a much reduced nuclear threat, the rise of the internet and the emergence of China and India as economic powers. This wave of liberation soon provoked the reassertion of state power after September 11th and a new frenzy of illicit accumulation, not least in Iraq.

What is ‘new’ about neoliberalism (or ‘neo-conservatism’ as it is called in America, where liberalism still evokes Roosevelt’s New Deal)? The state’s pretensions to manage national economies have been progressively dismantled everywhere, while its coercive powers have been expanded. Some were slower than others to catch onto the systematic stripping of public assets for private gain, profit accumulation with no acknowledgment of service, the erosion of civil liberties and the resurgence of racist imperialism.

The overthrow of social democracy in the name of market fundamentalism may have been achieved by coercion in Latin America; the privatization of post-socialism was licensed plunder; small states in regions like Africa that were already being bled by debt interest were brought to heel by the ‘Washington consensus’. Maybe the public authorities in the United States have long been less squeamish about employing techniques of intimidation in support of corporate profit. But who persuaded the pillars of European social democracy to roll over without a fight? The wholesale capitulation of national political classes to an obscene logic of self-enrichment still needs an explanation. Neither Klein nor Harvey is much help here.

To take another example from outside Europe, why would the leadership of the African National Congress throw away the legacy of the anti-apartheid movement in order to pander to international capital at the expense of their own long-suffering people? Naomi Klein’s chapter on South Africa is desperately thin, drawing on a handful of interviews to force the country into her all-encompassing vision, while ignoring the nuances of its history and place within the evolving world economy.

The rise of a sociological rhetoric of ‘embeddedness’ in recent years reminds us that Karl Polanyi’s stock has never been higher than today. In The great transformation, Polanyi (1944) debunked Victorian liberalism as the use of state power to secure the freedom of capital at the expense of all other interests. He condemned the high price the British working classes paid for the dominance of the ‘self-regulating market’; but there were also counter-movements within society like Chartism, as the victims of the new liberalization sought to defend themselves. Polanyi sometimes wrote of a ‘disembedded’ capitalism, but industrial markets remained thoroughly ‘embedded’ – first, in their dependence on the state and second through the links they retained with a range of social institutions. Polanyi’s real objection was not to the market as such, but to ‘market fundamentalism’.

At a recent London conference, ‘Rethinking economic anthropology: A human-centred approach’, Jean-Louis Laville reminded us of the two lessons to be drawn from the history of the 20th century:

First, market society sustained by a concern for individual freedom generated huge inequalities; then submission of the economy to political will on the pretext of equality led to the suppression of freedom. These two solutions called democracy itself into question, whether in the form of totalitarian systems or, with a similar result, through the subordination of political power to that of money. If we reject both of these options, it is then a question of developing institutions capable of guaranteeing a plural economy within a democratic framework, exactly what is compromised when the rationale of material gain without limit has a monopoly. (Laville 2008)

Laville, following Mauss and Polanyi, pilloried romantic radicals who would reject a caricature of the economy in the name of some future alternative, since all economic possibilities coexist now, including those that have been variously dominant in history. Our task is to build democratic solidarity (économie solidaire) through new institutional combinations and with a new emphasis. This means combining the free reciprocity of self-organized groups with the redistributive powers of the state.

It is, however, no longer as obvious as it was for Mauss, Polanyi and Keynes where the levers of democratic power are to be located, since the global explosion of money, markets and communications over the last quarter-century has severely exposed the limitations of national frameworks of economic management. We are clearly witnessing the start of another long swing in the balance between state and market. Central banks are pumping liquidity into failing asset markets. The rapid switch by the ‘masters of the universe’ from market triumphalism to the public beggig bowl would be surprising, if it were not so familiar. Before long, a genuine revival of Keynesian redistributive politics seems to be inevitable. But the imbalances of the money system are now global, as the financial rescue operation recently performed on failing American banks by the ‘sovereign funds’ of some Asian and Middle Eastern governments shows. Society is already taking the form of large regional trading blocs, and the inability of the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank, IMF, WTO) to serve any interest beyond that of Western capital has long been obvious. The strength of any push to reform global institutions will depend on the severity of the current economic crisis. A return to the national solutions of the 1930s is bound to fail.

The shift of economic power from the West to Asia is palpable. But it is too early to write off the United States, which remains the world’s largest economy and may soon reap the economic benefits of a lower exchange rate and the sell-off of overpriced assets. Rather than demonizing US imperialism as the source of all our woes, we should distinguish between the American government, corporations and people. The main opposition to the monopolistic privatization of the cultural commons by firms like Microsoft consists of other US corporations (Sun, HP, IBM) and American activist networks in the free software/ open source movement (with intrepid assistance from Scandinavia). American voters turned Bush into a lame-duck president and are now galvanizing world politics again through their choice of presidential candidates.

It will not do to place our trust for democratic renewal exclusively on small-scale initiatives in Latin America. The new combinations of money, machines and people
emerging today must be addressed squarely. For all her vivid writing and journalistic effort, Naomi Klein’s mono-
chrome synthesis promotes only a politics of evasion and despair. The world society that has developed in the last
half-century has some features never seen before and many that are perennial. Any way forward will be worked out
by China, Europe, the USA and regional leaders such as Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa. They will build on
an existing diversity that is hardly illuminated by catch-all phrases like ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘American capitalism’.

We are in the middle of an economic disaster, all right. So far the politicians, bankers and CEOs who got us into
this mess seem to be surviving, even prospering. But before long, people everywhere will be asking loudly ‘What hap-
pened to our money, our jobs and our houses? How did we let them get away with it? How can we make sure it doesn’t happen again?’ Things are likely to become a lot more turbulent yet, and debates about political economy will then need much more historical substance than li-
terary fashion seems able to offer at present.

Anthropology and the fossil fuel era

Guest editorial by Thomas Love

Thomas Love is professor of Anthropology and Environmental Studies at Linfield College, Oregon. He specializes on rural
livelihood in the Peruvian highlands and adjacent Amazonia, as well as in his native US Pacific Northwest. His current
focus is on the social and cultural implications of oil consumption patterns in these regions. His email is tlove@linfield.edu.

Humanity today faces several converging crises, but our prolific use of fossil fuels, particularly oil, underlies and
links together several of these, including pollution and global warming. Our need for continued access to fossil
fuels drives many of the conflicts we see today, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere. Should growth in demand
continue to outpace a declining supply, we shall be forced to make difficult choices about our ways of life.

In his essay on energy and human evolution, the late David Price noted how human beings use energy as hetero-
trophs, in other words by capturing and storing autotrophs (which in turn store energy from solar radiation). Humans
differ from both autotrophs and other heterotrophs in their abundant use of extrasomatic energy, i.e. capturing and
storing energy outside of the body. Following Leslie White, Price argued that humans have used this energy to sustain
life in ever denser settlements requiring plenty of cheap energy. Once energy becomes scarce, humans have prob-
lems: ‘if there are survivors, they will not be able to carry on the cultural traditions of civilization’ (Price 1995: 1).

Humanity is already in ecological overshoot (Catton 1980). No known alternatives have the quality and usefulness
of our current energy base. A barrel of oil contains the energy equivalent of about 25,000 hours of human labour; the
average citizen of an OECD country now lives materially better than the wealthiest elites a century ago. People
around the world, especially in India and China, are stepping up their consumption of fossil fuels.

From the mid-19th century onwards, petroleum (liter-
ally ‘rock oil’) and other fossil fuels took over from horse-
power, wood, whale oil and coal. With their apparent abundance, we quickly found a multitude of uses for them.
Modern civilization is built on cheap fossil fuels, which accounted for 88% of the total commercial energy con-
sumed in 2005, with oil alone constituting 39% of that total. Oil is at the hub of the world economy. Humanity’s
seemingly insatiable demand for it has transformed human life and cultures in producing and consuming societies
alike. The price of food and agricultural products, petro-
chemicals and plastics, the cost of anything transported
by air or over land rises with the price of oil. Rising oil
prices contribute to inflation and influence monetary
policy and interest rates, and in turn affect US, UK and
other countries’ foreign policies. The appeal of the US
dollar as a world currency is being reduced as US domi-
nation of world oil markets diminishes, and access to oil
has become a matter of national security deemed to merit
military intervention.

Oil is so vital to our growth economy today that we find
it almost impossible to imagine a world without it. Whilst
the notion that we are near the peak of world oil produc-
tion is still being debated, with oil prices doubling in 2007
to now surpass an all-time high of US$100 a barrel, the
stresses and strains of inelastic supply are beginning to
show and are not easily resolved. Escalating oil prices are
already encouraging development of alternative energy
sources, but this hardly helps us deal with oil’s scarcity in
the short, medium and even long term.

We are in the last days of cheap oil. Based on 13 models,
Figure 1 shows how world oil production is predicted to
peak between 2008 and 2010 at 77.5–85.0 million barrels
per day (Foucher 2007). Decline in the rate of production
after 2010 means that we need to find large new deposits
every year just to stay even, let alone fuel the growth in
demand we are experiencing. We are now consuming oil
at four times the rate it is being discovered; coupled with
increasing domestic demand in the oil-producing and other
non-OECD countries, this portends serious shortages in
the near future. Figure 2 adds natural gas and coal to this anal-
ysis, along with population growth trends, to demonstrate
how humanity faces an imminent crisis of peaking fossil
fuels (de Sousa 2008).

No known combination of alternative fuels can be
scaled up quickly enough to avoid major supply shocks
in the short and medium term. Since alternatives to oil can
be used to produce electricity, rather than primarily liquid

Fig. 1. World oil production from 1990 and as forecast through to 2020 AD.

Fig. 2. Consumption of conventional fossil fuels per capita, actual and as forecast through to 2100 AD.