

## ***HOUSE ORGAN***

### **A Speech That Didn't Get Delivered**

Claimed a half century ago from a large and shallow valley in Brazil's savannah, or *cerrado*, Brasilia apparently stands for everything ecosocialism is supposed to contest: massification on an inhuman scale, with suppression of community; enormous degrees of separation between units, with wretched public transportation (no light rail transport, not a bicycle lane, scarcely a sidewalk) and hence choking traffic; spectacular yet aggressive buildings embodying mathematical rather than autochthonous, earth-centered values—the capital of Brazil seems at first glance to be that kind of proclamation of modernity whose purpose is to defy mere nature. It has been billed as a catastrophe, and stuck me as such when I stumbled off my overnight, and typically wretched, flight to join the Third International Conference on the Environment sponsored by the Ministry of the same name.

However, I ended up rather fond of the place. Not because the above findings were proven false, but owing, as one says, to mitigating factors. I hadn't taken into account the "glory" aspect of Brasilia: its audacity and spirit of transformation. This was realized through the agency of Oscar Niemeyer, architect of many of its major buildings. No doubt, it is problematic to have one man take on so much in the design of a major city. But when the person in question is a radical humanist, the work can become a conduit for the aspiration of a whole people and through them, the rising of the South. However flawed, Brasilia does not convey the jack-booted aura of fascistic models of urban design such as those devised by Albert Speer and endlessly reproduced in our shopping malls and temples of administration. What is totalitarian in architecture conveys the obliteration of struggle. But Brazil is a zone of struggle, and the capital shows this as well. The very openings between buildings are both a nuisance and an offering of possibility. They let in the winds from the forest, and as in this conference, a considerable number of people from the forest as well, some of whom seemed to have just stepped off a canoe.

The whole notion of the national environmental conference is meant to be an exercise in direct democracy, hence, steeped in struggle. In principle, the people are to deliberate in congress and at its close, present a set of plans and demands to the government, which is supposed to take them seriously. In other words, civil society is to confront the state. Since the latter controls the terms of the gathering, a certain skepticism is warranted as to whether this is more than an exercise in public relations. And in fact the ecosocialist movement in Brazil is rather sharply divided between a faction who believes such gatherings are a waste of time (the PSOL, or Party of Socialism and Liberty) and another group integrated within the ruling Worker's Party administration. The PSOL remains active in parliament, and both factions have joined in the Brazilian Ecosocialist Network, founded in the World Social Forum in 2003 and an important national component of the Ecosocialist International Network. Thus the inevitable contradictions accompanying the germination of an radical alternative to the given order of things are both present in Brazil and substantially more fruitful than elsewhere. Quite a few countries should be envious of this level of development.

Thanks to this evolving ecosocialist presence, my appearance at the conference was no exercise in tokenism. I spoke before a climate change plenary, presided over a launching of *The Enemy of Nature*, gave a seminar on the principles of ecosocialism, and participated in the planning of other ecosocialist activities. I was even offered the opportunity of addressing the opening session of the conference itself, in the presence of 2000 delegates, along with much of the cabinet, and in particular, the legendary Minister of the Environment, Marina Silva, whose brainchild this conference was, as well as His Excellency the President of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, himself. I was told to prepare a ten minute speech; and after much hemming and hawing—for how on earth can a self-respecting ecosocialist speak honestly in such circumstances without being boorish to his hosts?—produced the document below. This was dutifully submitted, and about a week later, politely declined for the ostensible reason that there was room for just one foreigner in the event, and that quota had just been filled by Her Excellency the Environment Minister of Argentina. I took the blow, showed up, went to my reserved seat, and found that the Argentine minister was not there. Neither was President Lula, who sent his regrets and a deputy. I must say that this relieved my mind, because it soon became apparent that the meeting was really about Marina Silva and her possible bid to be the next President of Brazil, which was being vigorously encouraged; and there is nobody on earth I would less want to discomfit than she.

Lula and Marina Silva are unrelated by family, but complexly intertwined nevertheless. Both came from the bottom of society, and each was illiterate as a child—Lula until age ten, Marina until sixteen. The future President, once a shoe-shine boy, came from Brazil's industrial South, and his future Environment Minister, who is twelve years his junior, from its Amazonian North, the state of Acre with its indigenous, Afro-Indian rubber-tapping culture. Lula and Marina inhabit distinct ethnic lines as well as distinct fractions of working-class existence, and, it goes without saying, distinct gender positions as well. Marina is very definitely a forest person; Lula a specimen of Euro-Brazilian industrial development from its proletarian end. She was a disciple and associate of the martyred Chico Mendes, who was slain by the land barons of the great forests twenty years ago for organizing, with her help, indigenous rubber tappers. Mendes' Christlike visage hung above the proceedings over the word recognized by all: "Presente."

Marina Silva represents the legacy of Mendes within ecosocialism. She sees the flourishing of the human world and its natural firmament as two aspects of the same struggle, and stands for the preservation of indigenous life-worlds as an integral ecosystemic process. The minister for Brazil's environment bears more than a passing resemblance to Frida Kahlo (and shares with her a history of major illness), and is known to be intensely spiritual and religious, given to quoting people like Joseph Campbell.

Nobody would ascribe such traits to President Lula, who belongs squarely to another, all-too-common type: the working-class militant who sacrifices his birthright and integrates himself with the ruling class while burnishing his image as the organic representative of the underlings. Lula's record reveals a more or less full capitulation to neoliberalism, all the while skillfully retaining folksy, commoner ways. Very successful is Lula, though his strategy demands that he authenticate his image as a champion of the oppressed. For this purpose, Marina Silva proved an indispensable foil. She was to a real extent given her way, and so long as she stayed within bounds, allowed to be paraded before the world as the honored champion of Brazil's environment and its poor.

This marriage of convenience worked for a while; and indeed the pace of Amazonian destruction slowed discernibly in the first five years of her ministry. Over the last year, however, rising commodity prices gave her many antagonists in the “development” and agro-business sector a big boost. Marina began losing internal battles, and for the past six months, the rate of deforestation in Amazonia has accelerated sharply, triggering a major scandal and much conflict. We must pass over this for now, except to note a crucial turning point. On May 13, two days after the end of the Environment conference, Marina shocked the world and President Lula by abruptly resigning her post. Her replacement, Carlos Minc, was formerly environmental secretary of Rio de Janeiro State and one of the founders of the Green Party in Brazil. Agence France Presse observed that "Minc is considered a pragmatic politician, and as environmental secretary for Rio de Janeiro he has been criticized for his agility to concede permits for projects. In record time, he approved the necessary permits to build a gigantic petrochemical center at Itaboraí, in the northern area of the Rio State." Alas, all too-Green, though we will have to see how this plays out.

For the moment, Marina is back in the Brazilian Senate. Whether the sense of her Presidential aspirations sharply conveyed on May 7 is more than a passing fancy will also have to be seen. In any case, the ecosocialist movement in Brazil will not collapse. The tectonic forces that are transforming our planet and shaping history grind on. Meanwhile, the genie is out of the bottle. The little speech I wrote for May 7 did not deserve to be spoken on that occasion. But perhaps its preservation as text may be useful:

President Lula, Minister Silva, distinguished guests.

I am deeply honored to be here today. I am also deeply impressed that the leadership of a great country such as Brazil, so completely engaged in the world-system, would be open to hearing ideas that radically challenge that system. I can only ascribe this, first, to a remarkable degree of awareness of the depth of the crisis through which the world is passing, and second, to the plain courage to face a harsh truth. For this I salute you—and promise to hold nothing back from my vision of this dilemma.

I take the view that society is in the grip of a global ecological crisis that can be described as a savage and potentially fatal disease: a kind of cancer that grows malignantly, invading and metastasizing throughout the ecosphere. Moreover—and this is the more difficult part to accept—the pathology of this cancer and the driving force of the ecological crisis is the accumulation of capital, the very system that rules the world. Capital can no more check its compulsion to grow than you or I can voluntarily stop breathing; consequently its prodigious wealth entails a chaotic expansion of the economic product accompanied by the inevitable disintegration of the ecosystems that give us life. The capitalist system is killing us — not individually, though countless lives have been brought down by brutal labor, or expended in wars — but as a monster created by society over the last 500 years whose ruthless expansion will bring civilization down and could well presage the extinction of the human species.

This argument is of course extremely disturbing given the power of the capitalist system and the awesome implications of changing it. But I was a physician once, and

I learned then that if a person has a disease which would be fatal if left untreated, one is not doing him or her a favor by denying the seriousness of the problem. The same principle holds here.

The characteristic sign of this disease is that it always places the highest value on the making of profits in any transaction. This rule is ruthlessly enforced and implies unending competition throughout society. Greed and egotism come to rule capitalism, which is animated by a wild mania for wealth. All limits are set aside except as they increase profitability; and this inevitably splits humanity from nature, and makes nature a mere repository of resources or a dumping ground for waste. Inevitably also, this will surface into ecological damage when profit-taking leads to the open degradation of nature along with debasing the conditions of production, including the bodies of workers.

Ever-widening circles of ecological damage result, reflecting the system's constant pressure to expand. In 1984 the most violent localized episode of this kind occurred in Bhopal, India, when Union Carbide's pesticide plant blew-up because of profiteering-driven neglect. Twenty thousand died directly, and almost 24 years later, people are still dying at the site.

As the disorder developed we have seen whole regions devastated as a result of the interaction of different lines of causality bearing the imprint of capital's degenerative influence. The nightmare of Hurricane Katrina was one such catastrophe. It was compounded *first*, from global warming driven by capitalist industry's release of greenhouse gases, which heated the waters of the Gulf of Mexico to 33°C and consequently converted a category 1 storm to category 5; *second*, from decades of degradation of the Mississippi delta by excessive development, eliminating much of nature's protection from storms; *third*, from corresponding degradation of the dykes, levees, and other infrastructures of New Orleans, all of which are functions of the corrupting effects of capital upon government and public services (this greatly aggravated by the shocking callousness and incompetence of a federal administration whose entire loyalty is to the class of capitalists); *fourth*, from the relative absence of troops to supplement local authorities in times of crisis, this thanks to Cheney and Bush's oil war in Iraq; and *fifth* but certainly not least, because it structures disaster and roots it in history, from the racism accompanying capitalist exploitation of labor and the fracturing of its society.

Now another catastrophe is emerging: hunger. Not the traditional famines, which were regional, but famine extended in time and space, famine that is a plaything of cold economic laws. We are seeing for the first time hunger on a global scale, affecting at least 37 countries, many of whose governments are quaking as of this writing. . . for a parent who has to watch his or her child starve is a person who will stop at nothing. Millions are down to one meal a day in India; people have been killed in food lines in Cairo; they eat mud pies in Port au Prince to still their hunger, or offer their children on the street to whoever can feed them.

Analysts are quick to point out the complexity of the phenomena; they emphasize that there is no single cause for the hunger. No, no, nothing systematic here, just an

unhappy conjunction, a kind of bad luck. The better-off in places like India and China — and there are hundreds of millions of such—are eating more meat, which requires eight grams of grain protein for every gram yielded of animal protein. In addition, though the food supply has not yet absolutely dropped below the needs of the world’s stomachs, it is showing worrisome signs of levelling off and even declining. Thus China’s grain harvest has decreased 10 percent in seven years, as arable land becomes paved over, or blighted by pollution, or turned to dust by water shortages. In drought-ruined Australia, meanwhile, annual grain production has dropped from 25 to 9.8 metric tonnes in a generation . . . all this, as food demand is expected to double by the year 2030.

And then there is the matter of the inexorable rise in the price of petroleum, as ever-increasing demand intersects with the limits of supply. To ameliorate this, as we all know, the powers-that-be have hit upon the bright idea of producing biofuels, which alas, compete with old-growth forests such as Amazonia, on the one hand, and the nourishment that goes into people’s stomachs, on the other. And if the needs of fuel tanks somehow end up taking priority over mere rainforests or the feeding of poor children, well, that’s just the implacable working of the market, against which no man can stand.

All this is indeed complicated. It is bewildering, chaotic, non-linear, cascading, indeterminate. It is essential that we appreciate this complexity, and that we be humble before the unfathomable dynamics of nature. But we must not miss the awful simplicity at the core of these ecological lesions, that each of these points is organized according to the great class-structured forces of the human world. When priority is given to biofuels production as against feeding poor people or protecting the forest, or when decisions are made to exploit newly discovered oil fields such as the tar sands of Alberta, or closer to home, the offshore Carioca field which Business Week has recently called “a major reversal of fortune” for Brazil, these are decisions for capital and its ruling class, and against the integrity of the planetary ecology.

The new hunger does not ensue from a random assortment of forces, but is a structure driven by an underlying dynamic—one that I believe it is not transient, but here to stay. As with Bhopal and Katrina, the surface phenomena are set into motion by the social power of accumulation. Not one phenomenon observed above is detached from capital—which means, simply put, that all of it can come out differently if the class forces that enter into accumulation are altered. I mean this in particular instances, as in the business decisions that enter into the conversion of forests to biofuels, or deem it more essential to tend to the world’s motor vehicles than its children. And I mean it on a planetary scale also, for the appearance of phenomena like hunger on a global scale can only mean that there is a “globalized” system of capital in place, a neoliberal regime signifying the metastatic stage of the planetary cancer. That the great industrial captains, and their politicians, and their academics, and their media and think-tanks, would consistently distract our attention from this point is a scandal of world-historical proportions. That they would naturalize capital instead of seeing it as a system of human choices, and follow Margaret Thatcher when she proclaimed the true god of this world to be

“TINA”—that There Is No Alternative to capital as the god of this world—is a death sentence upon our children.

For there is an alternative; it has been called the “another world” by the emerging Social Forum movement. And it can be built if the vision and the will are strong enough. But this world has to be grounded in a new way of production—or rather, an old way brought into new prominence.

An essential principle is that people must be able to freely produce, which is to say, be democratically in control of the means of production, and this for two reasons. First, because an antagonistic society where a great mass of paupers confronts a small minority in command of the sources of wealth is as unacceptable ecologically as it is morally. A highly polarized class society is too violent and conflict-ridden to rationally regulate its relations with nature; hence social justice and ecological integrity are two aspects of the same structure.

Further, only a free association of producers can summon the creativity to solve the great problems of building an ecologically sane world, perhaps the most urgent of which is to liberate humanity from the trap of the carbon-based economy. The problems are prodigious: how to keep the oil in the ground; how to develop alternative energy sources as a real option, along with modes of production built around them; how to devise ways of living in harmony with nature instead of under the compulsions and addictions of capital’s consumerism—how, in sum, to replace a society grounded in possessiveness—“having”—with one of spiritual fulfillment—“being” . . . these are the challenges of the age, and the greatest in human history. And they can only be solved “from below.”

Innumerable early steps have been taken across the globe on such paths, which we may call, to sharpen our minds and focus our vision, *ecosocialism*. The challenge for creative government is to clear a way so that this path can be extended. The challenge for everyone is to see our way beyond a dying system, into a future worthy of humanity and nature.

—Joel Kovel