

The factory where we're made

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I'm telling you these stories on Aboriginal land. I'm not from here. I came here, uninvited by the First Peoples, in 1968.

I'm only beginning to be aware of the Old People. Uncle Max taught me how to be respectful when I was going near a very ancient meeting place like the one in the Blue Mountains where my children always gravitated to. I don't know how to read the country but I'm learning how to listen to it.

There are places all over Australia where the country is calling out to us, where the Old People of the country are calling out to us, where the hidden histories are calling out to us... that another kind of world is possible.

Prosperous Australia has a problem. Now is a good time to reflect on how, as a nation, we allow the voices of the unheard to remain unheard. But it is precisely in this contradiction that hope lies, joined inexorably, with the hopes of the oppressed across the globe. Nothing less than this all-embracing vision would be worthy of the kind of hope against all hope that is embedded in the smallest and humblest of daily struggles of the crushed in our midst; joined at the hip with the struggle for a different kind of world.

I learned this while sitting on our front porch in Liverpool in 1996. I was taking a break from working on my thesis, trying to digest what I'd been reading. Just at that moment, a woman and a man walked past; the man a few steps ahead of the woman, yelling:

"I know people. I've been to the factory where they're made."

Running inside I wrote this down. Then all but chased after the guy to thank him. Oh, happy theft! His insight crystallized much of what I was working on:

"The factory where they're made."

Or unmade.

I thought of the people I knew, starting with my own dad, who had been unmade in the factory. In my dad's case it was cancer from solvents he was required to use in testing road materials while working for Boral.

How many stories have I heard since then?

People made and pulled apart by social and economic structures that dehumanise, that compartmentalise, that destroy, that humiliate, that blame; people made to feel that lives are worth little, that their position at the bottom of the heap completely excludes and effectively disempowers them.

The World Health Organisation's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health released its report entitled Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health in 2008. According to its findings:

"Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale."

Michael Marmot, Commission Chair said: *"Central to the Commission's recommendations is creating the conditions for people to be empowered, to have freedom to lead flourishing lives. Nowhere is lack of empowerment more obvious than in the plight of women in many parts of the world. Health suffers as a result."*

Interestingly the Report also found the following:

"Wealth alone does not have to determine the health of a nation's population. Some low-income countries such as Cuba, Costa Rica, China, and the state of Kerala in India... have achieved levels of good health despite relatively low national incomes. But wealth can be wisely used. Nordic countries, for example, have followed policies that encouraged equality of benefits and services, full employment, gender equity and low levels of social exclusion. This is an outstanding example of what needs to be done everywhere."

Good policy is organically connected to self-empowerment and a redistribution of resources as an essential element of genuine empowerment.

This is why I believe we must engage in a practice of liberation; not paternalism.

We continue in Australia to be subjected to social policies that sit well with the kind of paternalism exemplified in Margaret Thatcher's oft-cited contention that "there is no such thing as society." Paternalism starts (and ends) with a highly unequal relationship of power. To "supervise the poor", as US academic Lawrence Mead advocates, is really to control and coerce people on the basis of race, class, gender, and disability.

The New Paternalism is exemplified in such policies as mandatory income management or using the threat of financial penalties on people in receipt of unemployment benefits, as if this could improve a person's chances of employment!

The New Paternalism is built on the following assumptions: people are largely to blame for their own marginalisation; people who are marginalised are naturally without power; power naturally rests with those who deserve it; those with power can, at best, use their power to bring about a change in the behaviour of those without power; those with power can, at worst, ignore the problems of the people who are marginalised; the problems experienced by people who are marginalised are their own problems; but their problems bleed into the

mainstream through increased costs, increased crime, loss of productivity, market constraints, and disorder.

These assumptions are as pernicious as they are unproven.

One night some years ago our children came to me to ask if they could watch a film after dinner. It was a weekday night with school the next day and so I answered with a resolute “no”. At first they begged; then they tried to negotiate. Finally they did something that caused me grave concern: they caucused! I saw them whispering in the corner of the dining room, hatching their plan. With that they leapt to their feet and started to march around the dining table chanting: “The children united will never be defeated!” My partner gave me a withering look and said: “I hold you completely responsible for this!” She knows she was really just as much to blame.

The better known versions of this popular chant originated with the Chilean struggle for liberation, ¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido! (The people united will never be defeated).

I once sat in the small apartment of a family who had escaped torture and imprisonment in Chile. The woman had organised church-based soup kitchens in the slums of Santiago. She was also taught by the people who were pushed out of society that a different kind of society was possible. She told me how she was arrested by soldiers violently barging into her home in the early hours of the morning. She explained how they raped her while she was pregnant and tortured her with electrodes and how they beat her. She told me these things with her young daughter playing at our feet. Then, pointing to her little girl she said: “She too is a compañera.”

I thought that she meant that the child had grown up in a family that believed passionately in the struggle for social change. “Yes, of course,” I said. “Of course, with parents like hers, she would be a compañera. She would want a different kind of world, one that is fair. ‘No’, the woman corrected me. ‘She has already suffered for a new society. She is a real compañera. She is a former political prisoner. She was born in prison’.”

The Chilean woman and her daughter were targeted as being members of the dangerous classes. So dangerous were they that they had to be imprisoned by the Pinochet regime. Indeed, the Pinochet regime was itself a response to the alarming growth in power of the dangerous classes, especially their audacity in struggling for the basics of life such as housing, sanitation, education, food, dignity.

Entire groups of people are classified as being dangerous to themselves, dangerous to the economy, dangerous to the status quo, dangerous to the social norms, dangerous to us. I want to explore the meaninglessness of the neat little ‘us’ at the end of that sentence. I want to explore with you the way in which the people who are classified as being dangerous are demonised, criminalised, pathologised.

I have been extraordinarily privileged in two ways particularly. Firstly, as a child of a working class migrant family I was immersed in the reality of this experience. Later, I worked with families and young people whose lives were much harder than mine and from whom I

received, and continue to receive, an invaluable education. In the St Vincent de Paul Society I have been privileged to be part of a social movement focussed on this learning from people who are pushed to the margins. This focus, if it is true, can only lead to a collective desire for, and commitment to, the construction of a new society. This social movement includes the St Vincent de Paul Society but reaches far beyond any artificial boundaries. I know who my companions are. I can recognise them easily in any place in Australia or in any part of the world. A companion, of course, is one with whom you share your bread (pane).

The people with whom we share our deep yearning for a new society are the people who, throughout history, have formed themselves and re-formed themselves into movements for social justice and social change. The history of social justice and social change has been written by social movements. Change does not come from above.

Secondly, I have enjoyed the enormous privilege of supplementing this education on the ground with some very helpful insights from books, especially when they are written from *below*. Books were for me both a source of delight and an arsenal from which to choose weapons as I became more and more aware of the need to fight. I was hungry for knowledge. I wanted to be able to use the tools of analysis and creativity to take things apart and to be part of the massive project to make something new.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Blacktown Public Library as well as to my school libraries in Blacktown and Fairfield. One should never underestimate the power of public libraries, one of the last great vestiges of municipal socialism. It was from *below* that I discovered the joyful sadness of the poet Cesar Vallejo. I found him on the shelves of my school library in Fairfield. Vallejo took the side of the crushed and claimed to write for the illiterate. He wrote, like only one who has been crushed can write:

'There are blows in life, so powerful... I don't know.'

It was from the Latin American political refugees in Fairfield and Liverpool that I learned how to read another poet, Pablo Neruda. Reading poets such as Vallejo and Neruda led me later to the powerful Aboriginal voices such as Bobbi Sykes. I came to Aboriginal Australia via Chile and Peru. This was the closest I come to reading the Country.

And this is what I, following my companions and teachers, read: that it is time to build a new political vision based on the view from below, a view based on the analytical insight that *the personal is political*. These words went from being the title of feminist writer Carol Hanisch's 1969 essay to being one of the most important insights not only for the Women's Liberation Movement but for all who are committed to progressive social justice and social change.

Changing the world is as deeply personal as it is broadly collective. I have had the joy of knowing many, many women and men who engage in the daily practice of learning the "art of gentle revolution" to use Leunig's beautiful coinage. I love listening to their stories and watching them at work on their oft-disparaged project of building a new society. What is it that distinguishes these people from those who seek to impose solutions to social problems from above? It is that they see themselves as perpetual students. Many, but not all, of them read voraciously. *All* of them make it their habit to listen to, and learn from, the

people in our midst who are crushed by the weight of structures of inequality. They listen to their stories and then they reflect together on how the political emerges in the heart of the personal. It is a two-way movement, though. The political is at the base of the concrete conditions in which a person lives. Their lives are bound by economic, social and legislative structures. But then the analysis of these conditions gives rise to a personal commitment to change them. This sounds all very simple. It is! It is actually simpler to tackle the social problems rather than trying to manage them in a futile attempt to salvage a crumbling status quo.

Let me be blunt. This is a radical agenda. It must go to the roots of our problems. But to do this we must first acknowledge the problems as *our* problems and not someone else's.

There's something particularly disquieting about quietness imposed from above in the heart of a democracy. Something eerie, if we're going to be honest, however, we have to admit that the voices of the people who continue to be oppressed and abandoned are, in so many ways, effectively silenced. Even, sometimes especially, when they are strong. Often they are like the gentle breeze or the still small voice. But in nearly all cases these voices, these stories of dispossession and quiet dignity, are neither heard nor heeded.

Recently, I visited Palm Island with other members of the Australian Social Inclusion Board. Palm, everyone reminds me, was established as the ideal place to exile those who were outspoken in the face of the colonizer and the dispossessor. "An unruly mob", one informant told me, the descendants of political prisoners. Unruly is an interesting word here, especially in the light of the New Paternalism or close supervision of the poor I referred to earlier. When Palm was allowed local self-government it was gutted of its economic activity, as is so often the case when the colonizer walks away from its former possession.

I was lucky on Palm. Apart from the powerful and hope-filled story-telling I listened to from some of the Council leaders, I was also able to privately talk with the softly spoken Lex Wotton. Lex has been instructed not to speak in public as a parole condition following his conviction for inciting a riot in the wake of the well-known death in custody on Palm Island. Eye-witnesses at the riot actually attest to Lex's attempts to restrain the angry crowd. Lex, however, continues to be tagged as a troublemaker. As Martin Luther King, another troublemaker, said: "a riot is at bottom the language of the unheard."

The unheard are everywhere: the people who have been placed under the yoke of compulsory income management simply because they receive a social security payment (and the Federal Government has the audacity to call this non-discriminatory), asylum seekers demonised as being illegal, people with a disability unjustly characterised as being too comfortable on a pension, the First Peoples of Australia living with the historical poison of stolen generations, stolen wages, stolen land and the attempted crushing of the spirit.

The stories of the unheard are a prophetic call not to paternalism from above but to empowerment from below. These stories bear witness to a hope for redistribution rather than a desire for retribution. As Paulo Freire wrote:

“The oppressor cannot find in their power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only the power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both.”

The keys to improving the lives of the unheard lies both in making the tools of education available to them, as is their fundamental right and in simply listening to them. It is not enough for the powerful to try to impose solutions.

It is to the Federal Government’s credit that in defining its own Social Inclusion Agenda it gives pride of place to the right of people experiencing exclusion to “have a voice, influencing the decisions that affect them”.

How sad then that this principle is disregarded as paternalistic policies such as compulsory income management are imposed while the obvious need for income adequacy, whether one is currently outside the labour market or stuck at its lower end, remains unheard. How, for example, is a young person experiencing homelessness meant to survive on a \$377 fortnightly youth allowance? And are we not failing our people when, according to a COAG Reform Council report, 43.5 per cent of working age adults have literacy skills below the minimum level required for work and 15 per cent (2.7million people) are estimated to be surviving with the lowest level of literacy skills? But it is easier to impute failure, indolence, and sometimes even insolence to the people who have been failed.

Why is it that the people who are most locked out are then constructed as being the rogue elements in the machinery of prosperity? Remember who the rogues are: the misbehaving poor.

The philosopher, Losurdo wrote: “... during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Virginia, indentured servants, white-skinned temporary semi-slaves, when caught after escaping, which they often did, were branded with the letter R (for ‘rogue’): made immediately recognisable, they no longer had a means of escape. Later, the problem of identification was definitely solved by replacing the white semi-slaves with black slaves: the colour of their skin made branding superfluous, the black was in him[/her]self-synonymous with ‘rogue’.”

Marginality, like love, happens anywhere. Wherever. Forced movement is the complement of imprisonment: Aboriginal people forced off their country; locked out, then locked up. Asylum seekers forced to flee their homes and then locked up in privately run detention centres in Australia.

What is poverty in a prosperous nation? It is the majority world peeking through the holes in the tawdry coverlets of the consumerist economy. It is the scent of disorder and disharmony that offends the senses of those who want only to be protected from the truth.

Our problem is not the bad behavior of a so-called moral underclass. Our problem is inequality. When we deny that this is the problem we end up looking for solutions in all the wrong places. We also end up re-framing the question incorrectly, so that it becomes a question of participation, or productivity, or compliance, or aspiration.

So we end up with solutions that worsen the problem of inequality. As if compulsory income inadequacy, or its accursed cousin compulsory income management, could actually help create the space for dignity and liberation! We should note here that compulsory income inadequacy occurs on both sides of the employment/unemployment divide.

When we ask the social question, we find the seeds of the social, and therefore political, solution.

Let us be clear. You don't build a community by attacking its people's dignity. You don't build a community up by putting its people down! You don't create social inclusion by further excluding people and reducing their choices even more, watching over them even more, controlling them even more.

As Lilla Watson and a group of Aboriginal activists in Queensland put it so beautifully:
"If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together."