

"A loaded gun Where the sun should be"ⁱ

In 1982 one of the founders of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Juan Pablo Perez Alfonso, called oil the devil's excrement. The former Venezuelan oil minister warned that it would bring ruin: "Look around you. Look at this waste, corruption, consumption, our public services are falling apart ... and debt, debt we shall have for years. We are putting our grandchildren into debt."ⁱⁱ

Now very late in the day, economists will back up Perez Alfonso's pessimism about the crushing impact of oil. Indeed in studies of oil-centred societies the 'resource curse' is now something of a cliché.ⁱⁱⁱ It obstructs an equally important discussion of how and why oil has supported more equitable development in a country such as Norway, or now in Venezuela. More than nationalism an unfashionably class-conscious rejection of servitude appears to be the common factor.

Oil dependency could still turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Behind the word 'globalisation' there is a crippling system of speculation accounting for as much as 98% of the world economy, dwarfing real goods and services, and always looking for the quickest and highest returns on capital investment.^{iv} Consequently globalisation is now infamous for the relocation of manufacturing to areas of low taxation with cheap and easily exploitable labour. But as reserves decline, oil prices inevitably rise and this can only increase the costs of getting goods back to the centres of consumption. In this way the cynicism of globalisation and overheated consumerism may meet an elementary obstacle.^v If so, war does not need to be the dismal outcome if it is possible to address the dysfunctional totality of our system.

Having passed through the Cold War when mutually assured nuclear destruction lurked in everyone's mind, the public is no longer haunted by the threat of total annihilation. With global warming we are more concerned with ideas of survival, but survival only in part. The underlying story in today's world is the brutal question of who and what can survive?

*In his 1992 poem, *Curse*, from the same year as the Rio Earth Summit, Roger McGough captured the new mood with the words 'a loaded gun where the sun should be.' McGough comes from Liverpool. In New Orleans, another famous city built on slavery, Hurricane Katrina demonstrated how a city and its people were collateral damage for an empire with more pressing matters to deal with. Not unlike slaves, the poor and the not quite up-to-date are universally expendable. The end of McGough's poem throws this contempt back on the rich.*

Sweeping aside literary intentions along with the actuality of exploitation carried on in the name of civilisation, democracy and development, the issue is turned into a question of which nation-states may still prosper in the midst of a new wilderness? In its different guises, the beast of competitive nationalism gets quite an airing. And unlike your anti-social behaviour nationalism is rarely named and shamed for its opportunism. Whole populations are condemned by World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies for falling behind in the race to a global meltdown and we go on living by the largely unquestioned rules of 'the great game.' But in backroom politics from left to right, from the grass-roots thinkers to invisible power elites, from radical philosophers of money to its tame economists, national sentiment is just

that. The real concern is all about forms of organisation best equipped to enter the battlefield in a general war on ourselves. This is the sort of ugly plight major industrialists have pushed for, and financiers have done well by. As Nathan M. Rothschild (1777-1836) and then John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937) advised; the best time to buy is when the blood is running on the streets.

From above there seems to be nothing which corporations do not look forward to possessing and selling whether it is a genetic code or a cleaned up and cooled down intake of breath. Sceptics and materialists are rightly pessimistic about the ring fencing seen in the rise of the gated communities and other subtle forms of economic 'apartheid'. They rightly ask what kind of privatised life and air-conditioned reality will be possible in a world still governed by the mistaken notion that making money is the same as real wealth. The managerially minded proponents of the ideology which says that money-making is at one with the common good dream up the future in targets and promises of better things to come - all sorts of things (such as trains) are oddly unavailable for the common good just when they are needed: right now. But the future is bright when your call is in their queuing system.

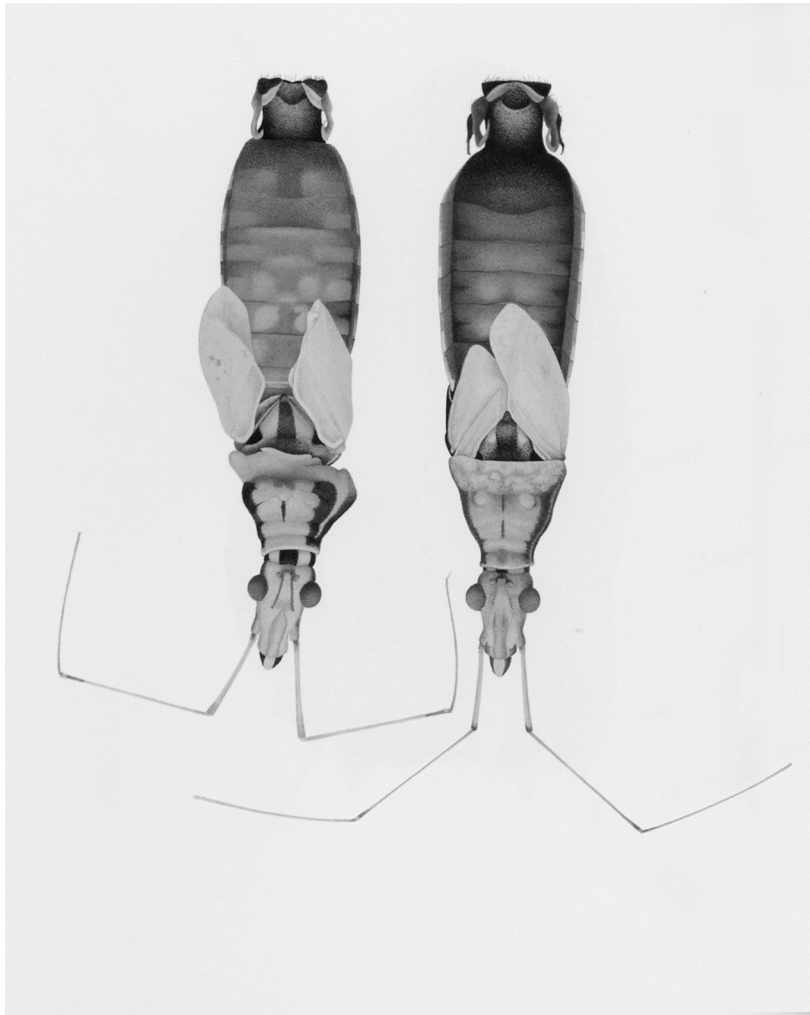
The future is also bright when the political class periodically searches for a democratic mandate which in recent years has been dwindling and getting harder to come by at all. In this race there are some truly grandiose futurological targets like the UN Millennium goals set to end poverty as we know it in just a few years. Many of these targets would be quite revolutionary in ambition if they did not have precisely the same rhetorical value as the announcement of successfully completed five year plans in the Soviet era. As some thoughtful socialists saw then, all thought of the future included only "that which could be evaluated for the sake of stabilising the existing system."^{vi}

Any honest citizen roped into the media circus for the purposes of providing a few moments of vox pop will be reprimanded or cut short for not keeping to the point. Politicians and media pundits revile unbounded discussion. For the most part, they proceed carefully from point to point before reaching some quite pointless and entirely speculative pronouncement. This is the culture that has grown alongside a speculative economy. In retail societies, with little to market but lifestyle choices, it can be seen in the branding and re-branding of cities in an effort to increase property and land values in the industry of so-called regeneration. In the so-called knowledge economy which in fact turns education into training, it can be seen in the deskilling of students. "Who would have thought thirty years ago that it would have been possible to graduate from an economics degree without having come into contact with Keynes' General Theory?"^{vii} Writers who grasped the whole of our system like Keynes, Schumpeter, Polanyi and Marx are all being dropped from syllabuses.

As different populations converge under what is a nearly totalitarian economic system, opting out, chipping away, doing your bit, dreams of scaled down utopias, are also the ways the prevailing survivalist ideology is made more palatable and its dog-eat-dog message managed. Until the word democracy can be used with more universal integrity and its egalitarian values recovered for the sake of a plausible way of life, all that remains is the popular venom which ends McGough's Curse:

*May those who sold us
Down the river
As polluted
As the lies they told*

*Find their banknotes
Carcinogenic
Nuclear active
Their gold.*



*Illustration by Cornelia Hesse-Honegger who documents the deformation of insect life exposed to low level radiation in the vicinity of nuclear power stations. Taken from *The Future's Mirror*, published by Locus +, Newcastle (1997)*

*Two Damsel bugs (*Nabis rucosus*)*

Left: the right wing is too short

Right: damaged wing as well as completely displaced and misshapen neck plate.

Found in the grounds of the Paul Scherrer Institute ETH (by J.Jenny) Painted in Zurich 1990-91. 42cm x 29.7cm

-
- ⁱ From 'Curse' by Roger McGough, in *Defying Gravity*, published by Viking Penguin (1992)
- ⁱⁱ Quoted in 'Over a Barrel', editorial, *Variant*, Issue 28, <http://www.variant.randomstate.org/index.html> (accessed March 2008)
- ⁱⁱⁱ *The Political Economy of the Resource Curse: A Literature Survey* by Andrew Rosser, Institute of Development Studies Working Paper 268 (2006)
- ^{iv} *The Future of Money, Creating New Wealth, Work and a Wiser World*, by Bernard Lietaer, published by Century Random House (2001) and *Justice, Peace & Creation concerns economy*, World Council of Churches, <http://www.wwc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/economy.html> (accessed March 2008)
- ^v *Speculation: Globalization vs. Peak Oil: Could rising energy rates trump cheap labour?*, by J. Maynard Gelinas <http://massinine.livejournal.com/1791.html> (accessed March 2008)
- ^{vi} *The new Hungarian quarterly, In memoriam Gyorgy Lukács 1885-1971*, 'Lukacs on Futurology' Kultura, Budapest. (1972)
- ^{vii} *Reclaiming the Economy, Alternatives to Market Fundamentalism in Scotland and Beyond*, edited by Andy Cumbers and Geoff Whittam, Scottish Left Review Press and *Variant Magazine*, and review article in *Variant* Issue 31, <http://www.variant.randomstate.org/index.html> (accessed March 2008)