Five Even Geographies; being a collection of Utopian Visions

Concerning how the world could otherwise be. Published in response to the exhibition entitled 'Uneven Geographies', held at Nottingham Contemporary

and containing works by Base 51 Centre for Young People, Brazil’s Landless’ Workers Movement, John Rewling, Dr. Sara Motta and Class 5MC of Haydn Primary School.

Edited by Rachel Walls and David Bell
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Foreword: Towards an Even Geography
Rachel Walls and David Bell

This small, rather humble pamphlet is part of an event called ‘Towards an Even Geography’, commissioned in response to the Uneven Geographies exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary from 08 May to 04 July, 2010. The diverse and challenging works in that collection seek to make visible the inequalities created– and exacerbated– by neoliberal globalisation; asking us to pay attention to the complexities of global economic exchange and the migration of peoples. They also force us to consider how our everyday actions impact on those we cannot see, and whose voices we cannot hear.

To many, this is just the way the world is and the way it always will be. The world is indeed uneven and we may regret that, but there is little we can do to change it. Since the collapse of communism in the USSR and China’s rapid turn to neoliberal economics, capitalism seems to be the only game in town: ‘There Is No Alternative’, as Margaret Thatcher might put it. There is, therefore, a chilling truth to the statement– variously attributed to Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson– that ‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’.

Our project seeks to challenge this, by forcing people to imagine a more ‘even geography’. It thus constitutes a return to Utopia: a form both misunderstood and maligned. “It is pointless because it is impossible” says common sense. “It is dangerous because it is totalitarian” says experience.

We do not deny that Utopia is an awkward customer. It is– by its own definition– impossible: the term being a conflation of the Greek for place (topos), good (ou) and no (eu): ‘the good place that is no place’. Perfection is not realisable, because people have different desires. One (wo)man’s utopia is another’s dystopia. As Sara Motta reminds us in this collection, utopia is something intensely personal: any attempt to impose it upon us by those with power is doomed to failure. This was an issue debated with great ferocity by some of the children at Haydn Primary. In the top right of the poster they have produced is ‘Newer York’, a state which ‘recycles everything it can’, and which is democratic. ‘What’, we asked the boy who had created this vision of the good life, ‘if the people decide they don’t want to recycle everything?’. For him, democracy won out, but the girl who banned fishing was adamant: if someone wanted to fish, they’d have to leave her utopia.

These are not issues that can be decided purely through utopian design, but the act of imagining other worlds and other ways of being is vital if we are to
escape the uneven geographies of the present. This change need not be large-scale: the extract from John Newling’s *The Lemon Tree and Me* included in this pamphlet speaks of a personal relationship with a lemon tree which perhaps provides an exemplary model for us all to be inspired by as we seek alternatives to the alienating processes of mass production central to our contemporary world.

Neither must Utopia be entirely oriented to the future: the utopian impulse may start by addressing desires unfulfilled in the present. The beginnings of a utopian impulse can be seen in Roxy Wilson’s ‘Confusion’ in which qualities like ‘safety’ and ‘forgiveness’ vie for attention with the more dystopian aspects of our world: war, poverty, betrayal. So long as we have the hope which looms large in the collaborative collage produced by the Base 51 group, we can continue to think how we might promote the former at the expense of the latter.

As Sara Motta reminds us, then, Utopia can be ‘prefigurative’: a better way of life that lurks in the present and needs to be extrapolated, rather than a place hovering over us in an abstract future. Those looking for prefigurative utopian forms could do worse than to look at the Latin American social movements of which Sara writes, whose successes (worker controlled factories, popular education, environmental protection) show us that There Is An Alternative, and that capitalism is not the only game in town.

*Five Even Geographies*, then, does not contain any answers. Rather— it is designed to serve as a conversation starter. Its Utopias (and its thinking about Utopia) should be seen not as blueprints but as a stimulus for further Utopias: a never-ending project of utopian feedback. *Towards an Even Geography* is not just an event run by Nottingham Contemporary: it is a project to which we must all return constantly.

The real task, of course, is to realise these visions in the real world. This will not be easy, but by thinking through other ways of being we can be sure that—as the World Social Forum’s slogan has it—*Another World Is Possible!*

**Contributors**

The Global Project Group at Base 51 comprises of Roxy Wilson, Terri-Ann Brunt, Charlotte Martin, Nicole Voce, Katrina Rowlands, Stephanie Rowlands. These young women have been studying global issues such as human trafficking and modern day slavery with Base 51’s open space manager Jeniesha Doyle and other staff at the Nottingham based centre for 12-25 year
olds. Their contributions to *Five Even Geographies* are informed by their studies and the *Uneven Geographies* exhibition.

**John Newling** is a Nottingham based artist whose work has been exhibited internationally. He has generously contributed an excerpt from his forthcoming book, *The Lemon Tree & Me*. There is a utopian impulse in this piece and the wider work that inspired it (*The Lemon Tree*, now a permanent work at The Collection, Lincoln). Newling suggests that through gardening and considering ourselves as “gardeners of the public domain” we might learn to be more socially and ecologically responsible.

**5MC at Haydn Primary School**, in Sherwood, Nottingham, recently learnt about countries of the world and political systems with their teacher Mary Chambers. They combined this knowledge with imagination and art to produce a huge number of thoughtful even geographies. Not all could be included in this pamphlet’s collage, inspired by Öyvind Fahlström’s *World Map* (1972) and Eduardo Abaroa’s *We Just Need a Larger World* (2009), but will be hosted on our blog.

**Ademar Bogo and Ribamar Nava Alves** are poets from Brazil’s Landless Worker’s Movement (MST)- a social movement of over 1.5 million landless members which carries out land reform, occupies unused lands and runs cooperative farms.

**Dr Sara Motta** is a lecturer in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham, where she co-directs the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ). She has worked with social movements across Latin America, the institutional left in Chile and Brazil and local community movements in Nottingham.

**Rachel Walls** is a PhD candidate in the School of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Nottingham. Her research looks at intersections between surveillance and screen stories in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. She is currently co-organising an East Midlands research network and series of events around the theme of New Research Trajectories: Navigating City and Online Space.

**David Bell** is a PhD candidate in the CSSGJ at the University of Nottingham. He draws on the works of Gilles Deleuze, utopian studies philosophy and utopian literature to argue for an ongoing, ‘nomadic’ utopianism which he applies to the practice of improvising music, popular education and certain architecture. He is writing a book on the politics of improvising music for
Confusion
A Better Place
Roxy Wilson

An ideal world for you and me
For our children and theirs to see
An ideal world full of peace
And captive people to be released

When the human race developed
So did our ignorance
We close our eyes and turn our cheeks
To a reality we don’t want to face

Designer Clothes and flashy cars
While others wear shackles leaving scars
Four-bedroom house or a one-room mud hut:
What would you choose?
What if you didn’t have a choice?

Many people don’t have a choice
The world does not hear their voice
But they don’t complain
Or live their lives in vain
They accept the pain
Because they know no different

No more pain, anger and hurt
Lots more jobs, honest work
No more regret or guilty feelings

People living long full lives
Parents and grandparents, husbands and wives
Safe on the streets, safe in their homes
Safe in numbers and safe on their own

An ideal world for you and me
For our children and theirs to see.
From *The Lemon Tree and Me*  
John Newling

*The Lemon Tree & Me* is an account of an intense period of time between March 2009 and March 2010. It records the relationship between *The Lemon Tree & Me*, a relationship of meaning and materiality that constructed, cultivated and reviewed a poetics of responsibility. It is a relationship that advocates an intelligent ecology based on values that are immanent in the complex workings of nature. Between ethics, ecology and aesthetics *The Lemon Tree & Me* finds a new ground in a generative programme of intensive care to influence our responsibilities as gardeners of the public domain.

The following is a short extract from the body of the account. The book *The Lemon Tree & Me*, authored by John Newling, will be published in the autumn of 2010.

**Gardening in the public domain.**

The act of gardening subverts the authority of mechanistic thinking, with its prescribed set of cause and effect relationships that have enabled us to produce rational proofs. In gardening we live within the authority of nature and experience its immanent vitality in the emerging complexity of Life. *The Lemon Tree & Me* imagined a space for a creative dialogue between ecology and aesthetics; germinated from the seeds of practical experience the artwork grew into an inventory of my unique relationship with the tree.

This relationship involved the myths of nature. My connection to the lemon tree was shaped by a cultural history of tree mythology, the ancient traditions of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. On this mythical ground nature flourishes in all its uncertainty, as the certainties of rational knowledge give way to the turbulent waters of belief, imagination, speculation and superstition. *The Lemon Tree & Me*, an assemblage of nature and culture, was a work where art can play its part in re-evaluating the relationship between society and ecology. In contemporary culture we need a whole new set of myths, a soul technology cultivated in the small acts of everyday life, in which existing hierarchies of knowledge and authority are opened up and enriched in a much wider network of experience.

As I looked after the lemon tree a set of questions came to mind about my contract with nature. I became aware of a desire to intuit the connectedness
of everything, to compose the impossible ‘big picture’ from the ritual act of gardening.

Caught between reason and revelation, I opted for the pragmatism of the garden and decided to check on the lemon tree’s progress. There is a type of gardening between mental and physical reality, a sort of spiritual purpose in one’s green fingers, to which I became more attuned as I saw the amazing things that happened to the lemon tree. The spirit is in the material, it was embedded in my conversations with the tree and in the complexity of a nature I could neither predict nor control. My relationship to the lemon tree was defined by the contingencies of life, re-balanced and re-composed in a mixture of ethics, aesthetics and ecology. I had a degree of responsibility toward the tree but I often felt as though I worked on its behalf. I could reason the nature of this shifting ground only through the practical experience of tending to the tree. Gardening became sculpture and sculpture became life as my faculty for reason was overwhelmed by a sense of wonder. In the exchange between ethics, ecology and aesthetics, the art of gardening found a new ground of possibility.

A new perspective took root as I oscillated between the phenomenological and theological antecedents of my encounter with the lemon tree. There has been a transition over recent years from the doctrines of a religious society to the overt materiality of the secular. This shift from the concerns of the group to the desires of the individual has cast nature as a resource to be exploited and consumed. The beliefs and practices of the twentieth century have disconnected human nature from Nature obscuring the spirit of the material. *The Lemon Tree & Me* gives a perspective which, in its own small way, allows for a renaissance in the ecology of being. It throws into relief the need for a new communion of values, an art of living which is spiritual in intent.

My art of gardening does not advocate a return to the authority of the Academy. It is worlds away from a Renaissance in a strictly art historical sense. It is an attempt, at a grass roots level, to restore a set of values to materiality, values which are immanent in the complex workings of nature, and which are revealed in practice as a code of conduct, where gardening becomes a metaphor for living.

On the common ground of ecological sustainability, art can both enrich and nurture a new belief in the social value of civic authority, based on our shared responsibilities as gardeners of the public domain.
Dream and Time
(To Fifteen Years of the MST)
Ademar Bogo

The dream comes of age
Planted on a boldness cradling
Life for the determined warrior born,
Fifteen years ago in time and more in dreams
Since the people’s voices sought to claim the land
And make of peace a force for making war.

Battles mark the days
Books mark the history
Anthems mark the joys.

Tears too are part of this long march
Ever watering the dream so valiant
Of those convinced that in sowing blood they’d be born again
That in every step the people made...
In its victories would live forever

And the land like a soft sheet spreads
Offering its moistened lap
Showing still the last battle’s scars.
With marks of beleaguered latifundia
Arise: men, women and children
Tracing with a single sigh their line of fate
And marking their own hands
With calluses that dignify them.

It’s the land that resources human beings
In conscience planting
Courage and resistance
Sowing solidarity.

Mantles of scorching plastic unfurl
As they form their cities without walls
and without the woe of a wandering people
Each designing a place of one’s own
Leaving ever-open a door to the horizon
Where stands their pride-filled banner
Calling in its dance for all to stride on.

Now on the land inscribed with hoes
Words forming fullness and unity
No more hungers no more sorrows
Then dried up valley will recover its beauty
And its voice calls out in praise of freedom

There'll be no faces happier
Than those imbued with values rooted in
and springing from the joyous heart
Of dream and passion
That each of us
Bears planted in our breast.

Little Plot of Earth
Ribamar Nava Alves

Oh little plot of earth
I bear so many scars
And a dream in my hands

To flee from misery
I've travelled many leagues
Through this wide world
Tired, tired days
With swollen feet
From so much walking
In files we marched
Through cities passed
I'll never forget

At a road's edge
We suffer and fight
But it was never in vain
It was never in vain

Oh little plot of earth
I bear so many scars
And a dream in my hands
My eyes are turned
Towards a new world
Yet to be born

From the people’s fight
To get rid forever
Of being left out

For a project for life
With human beings
First and foremost

At a road’s edge
We still suffer and fight
But it will never be in vain
It will never be in vain.

These poems and many more can be found on www.landless-voices.org, a website hosted by the School of Modern Languages at the University of Nottingham which archives the images, voices and forces of the 15 million landless rural workers of Brazil who formed the MST in 1984.

As well as poetry it contains photographs, films, dances, music, statements by intellectuals and artists, academic papers, bibliographies, maps, tables, murals, sculpture, paintings, literature, and children’s compositions and drawings.
Our imagination and ideas about change and transformation cannot be separated from our histories of self; to do so is to disembody the thinking and practice of utopia. So part of a utopian practice of imagining otherwise is to unite that which is subjective, emotional, embodied and intellectual to the political.

Hybridity marks my experiences, desires, research and politics; not fitting into boxes, categories and hierarchies. How this colours my idea of utopia is that there isn’t one fixed idea or end state of utopia; rather I have an orientation of openness to the future, an embrace of our unfinished nature as human beings and therefore an excitement of the many utopias that are in the making and yet to be made in our everyday lives.

The experiences of childhood were the straddling of many worlds; Colombian migrants, eastern European Jewry escapees, democratic socialist feminists. I was the unidentifiable (sometimes paki) brown girl in the ethnically divided place of the classroom; uncategorisable from the inside and frequently miscategorised from the outside. Slippage and inbetweeness, plurality and multiplicity constitute the roots of my psyche and desire.

My desires as I hit adulthood were shaped by experiences of orthodox Marxism with its political lines, fixed ideologies and ends-justifies-means practice, but these clashed with the hybridity of my desire and perhaps explains my being spat out the from ‘the party’. Whence began a journey of embracing my desires for hybridity and plurality; for another way of imagining and practicing politics; one that whilst anti-capitalist was about self-determination and processes of re-apprehension of the self in the world.

Here the academic self steps in; processes of research into strands of heterodox Marxism began; a Marxism that placed the question of alienated social relations at the heart of an understanding of capitalist domination; which transformed my understanding of power as something out there to something which is constructed through the alienation of our creative capacities into subjectivities and social relations which become ‘solidified’ into the structures of the market and state. Therefore social transformation and political change became a question of transforming our everyday social relationships and subjectivities.

Parallel to this were my experiences of Latin American autonomous social
movements, particularly the Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados de Solano (MTD Solano unemployed movement) of Argentina, the Landless Workers Movements (MST) of Brazil and the Comités de Tierra Urbana (Urban Land Movements) of Brazil. All these movements are movements of communities of the periphery- landless peasants, unemployed and shantytown communities- communities generally ignored, shifting, plural and hybrid yet often miscategorised. All of them, to differing degrees, develop a politics that aims to break with the patterns of traditional politics of both left and right, which was a politics led by vanguards or organised in a hierarchical manner in which individuals delegated their intellectual and political powers to a political leadership. They instead seek to develop their utopias as part of the process of creating alternative logics of being and doing. They do this in their everyday life developing popular education and methodologies of democratic participation; working in assembly to discuss matters of health, education, childcare, and production, collectively making decisions about how they want to organise their lives. It is a prefigurative post-representational politics that is intellectual, affective, subjective and collective. It is open-ended and in the process of becoming without end; a politics that is clearly anti-capitalist but developing a plurality of ‘other’ ways of being, doing, creating, living and loving. Hybridity, openness and plurality characterise these experiences of utopias in the making.

These political practices can teach us much about a politics that is prefigurative and post-representational; one that can contribute to the creation of other worlds that we desire in our here and now.

So where does this leave me in my imagining otherwise? Perhaps it brings me back to the beginning in the sense that it suggests that it is from the cracks and the margins, from the space that is uncategorisable- the space that escapes fixity and sameness that we can begin to start asking questions together and begin to make and imagine other ways of being and doing. Where this might lead (both individually and collective) is unknown, but maybe it can contributes to opening up the possibilities of creating the worlds we desire in the present.
As part of the ongoing nature of the Towards an Even Geography project, a few copies and a PDF of a second edition of this pamphlet will be published—containing not only the visions contained here but also those produced by those present at the launch event at Nottingham Contemporary on July 1st 2010.

These will also be hosted online—along with those contributions we did not have space for in here—on our blog at http://towardsanevengeography.posterous.com.

There are a number of people to thank for making this possible. We cannot offer enough gratitude to all our contributors—whose enthusiasm and generosity made this project a pleasure from start to finish. Rob Blackson and Daniella King’s support at Nottingham Contemporary was also invaluable and enormous thanks must go to the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice, whose generous contribution paid for printing costs. Finally, thank you to Laiz Chen from the University of Nottingham’s School of Modern Languages for kindly allowing us to use the MST poems she has translated and all those—wherever they are in our uneven world—who create act to create utopian spaces.

Another world is possible.