**Performing a Positive Alternative Amid a Failing World Order**

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In some ways I don’t fit on this panel or at this conference. I’m not a sociologist or a political scientist or an economist. I’m not an academic of any kind. I’m a playwright and a director, and the artistic director of the Castillo Theatre in New York City.

At the same time, I’m a third generation communist. My paternal grandfather, Isadore Friedman, joined the Young Communist League in Bialystok, Poland after losing his best friend during a pogrom. The communists were the only ones arming to fight back against the anti-Semites. He fled the Russian Empire to avoid the Czarist Army and eventually wound up in New York City. His son, my father, Ken Friedman, was first arrested at the age of 12, after he’d run away from home, got a job in upstate New York picking strawberries and tried to organize the migrant farm workers into a union. He was sent back home, went on to be named an All-City football quarterback, and, when he graduated high school at the age of 17, fought in Spain as part of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Back in the States, he became an organizer for the Congress of Industrial Organizations. My parents met in a radar factory where they both worked and which he organized into the United Electrical Workers.

I was born in 1950 and grew up during the repression of the Left in the U.S. known as the McCarthy Period. The children’s camp my father ran for the Communist Party during the early fifties in New Jersey was fired upon and had it wells poisoned by locals because it had Black and white kids camping together. Every morning when my mother walked me to kindergarten and first grade on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, two FBI agents would be waiting for us and walk us to school. They were apparently looking for Soviet spies. However, probably the biggest impact the repression had on me growing up was that my family had to move a lot. Most American unions during that time adapted provisions that banned communists from working for the union, so my father, who was really good organizer, was fired over and over again. By the time I graduated high school, I had attended 12 different schools—our travels took us from New York City, to rural upstate New York, Kentucky, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Baltimore, Maryland and then back to the New York City area for my last years of high school.

As a result of always being the “new kid,” I was by the time I reached high school, not surprisingly, rather shy and awkward. When, as a junior, I arrived at my last high school which was in a middle-class suburb of New York, I discovered that the school had all sorts of after school clubs, and in an attempt to meet people, I joined a bunch of them, including the Drama Club. The Drama Club put me in a play, and that changed my life. On stage I could do all sorts of things I couldn’t do in “real life.” I could be funny; I could flirt with girls. Although I didn’t have the language for it then, the theatre gave me permission to go beyond myself, to try out new versions of who I was, to develop.

Within a year of getting to college, I auditioned for and got into the New York Street Theatre Caravan, a political street theater based in Coney Island, Brooklyn. We would perform political plays on the back of a flatbed truck. We’d arrange a performance in advance with a local block association, load the truck up with the costumes, props and lights, drive to the site, take the sides off the truck, set up the lights, plug them into a friendly storefront, or rig them to a street lamp, put on our costumes and perform our loud, rowdy radical show for the block, including people watching on the fire escapes.

In the summer of 1969, we took our truck and two vans and headed across the country. We did performances sponsored by, among others, the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the American Indian Movement, the United Farm Workers, the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, and a rank and file caucus in the United Mine Workers. We performed not only in poor urban communities but on Native American reservations, the lettuce fields of California, the oil fields of Oklahoma, and the mountains of West Virginia. Not only did I experience first-hand the remarkable cultural diversity of the United States, I also experienced the impact that live theatre can have on people across a wide spectrum of cultures, experiences, and backgrounds, people who, for the most, part had never before seen a live performance. That trip set me on the larger journey that has been my life, a journey that, in retrospect, looks like a quest to find the connection between performance and transforming the world.

While all this theatrical activity was happening, I was also a political activist in the more conventional sense. I’d helped to organize and took part in numerous anti-war demonstrations in high school. Once I got to college, I became active with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the hegemonic radical student organization of the period. In particular, I became a leader on the Fordham University campus of SDS’s Worker-Student Alliance, which was led by the Progressive Labor Party and from there I went on to another Maoist group, the Revolutionary Communist Party. In the mid-1970s I even helped to found what we at the time considered to be the anti-dogmatic, non-revisionist American Workers Party which lasted about seven years before it imploded, as did most leftist grouplets of the 1970s and early ‘80s, amidst a lot of sound and fury signifying virtually nothing.

I wound up getting a doctorate in theatre history and then deciding not to apply for a university position. What I wanted to do more than research and teach theatre history—and I what I thought the world needed more as well—was to find a way to create theatre with and for poor and working people. So, I returned to New York where I thought, correctly as it turned out, that there would be the largest overlap between theatre artists and progressive political activists. There, eventually, I found a group of, even then, unconventional Marxists who were organizing in New York City’s poorest communities and who, at the same time, were engaged, as no other progressives I had ever encountered, in the subjective aspects of capitalist oppression—culture, psychology and education. Working with this determined core of community organizers, I helped to found the Castillo Theatre, which has been producing mostly new politically progressive theatre, in tandem with community and youth organizing, since 1983. From these roots and other forms of social engagement and reflection, has emerged, forty years later, a new performance-based approach to creating positive alternative futures.

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I’ve shared this autobiographical sketch as a way of both explaining why I am here today and of setting up what I’m assuming will be, for most of you, a new approach to social change, an approach that in recent years has come to be called “performance activism.” (Friedman & Holzman, 2014) When thinking about alternative futures, it’s important, I believe, to think about *how* those futures can be built. We all know that the future is not simply imagined; it is built. Less obvious is that the method by which it is built will have everything to do with what is realized. Attempting to build an alternative future based on an already articulated and, I would argue, therefore fossilized, set of ideas called ideology must, it seems to me, yield very different results than one built through playful experimentation and improvisation. The 20th Century gave us tragic examples of ideological attempts at building alternative futures. The social experiment that I’ve been a part of for forty years is part of a much larger movement coming into being around the world—East and West, North and South—that has shifted away from ideological attempts at organizing alternative futures toward playful, performatory and improvisatory ways of creating new possibilities. What the various individuals and small groups that make up the performance activist movement have in common is that they’re seeking new ways, through play and performance, to empower the poor and oppressed, to build community, to address local and international social and political issues, to bring antagonistic forces and communities together, to heal trauma, to educate, to free the imaginations of those who have had their imaginations beaten or bombed or starved out of them.

The social activist community of which I’m a part is just one foci among many in the performance activist movement. It has, however, done more than other foci in the emerging movement to articulate how and why performance as revolutionary activity works, and it has certainly built one of the world’s largest and longest-lasting networks of organizations and activities utilizing a performance-based approach to social change and human development. This afternoon I’d like to provide with you a brief overview of our community’s history and methodology—and how they’re intertwined. I’d also like to share the impact it’s having and speculate a bit on its implications, beyond our own limited work, for creating positive alternative futures.

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We call what we’ve created a “development community.” Development because we see the work we do as creating environments in which individuals and communities can find ways to develop beyond (transform) the social and cultural constraints imposed upon us all by corporate capitalism. Community because these environments are providing people from all ethnicities and social strata in the United States and beyond with a way to be part of something larger than themselves without relying on ideology or identity. Unlike the communities being organized by the Right, which, based on ethnic identity or nationalism, are backward looking and exclusionary, the community I’m talking about is forward-looking and open. It’s open to all who want to participate in its activities, and its activities consist of building grassroots alternatives to society’s failing institutions.

Historically, this community’s roots are in the upheavals of the 1960s. It’s a community in which the radicalism and energy of that era have not only survived, they have been nurtured and transformed into an on-the-ground alternative to a failing world order. Beginning in the 1970s by organizing a base in New York City’s poor communities of color and gradually building support among a broad range of social strata, this development community has, in addition to the Castillo Theatre mentioned earlier, built youth programs, schools, social therapy centers, a grassroots-think tank, an ongoing series of international conferences for and networks of performance activists, and, in the U.S., electoral reform organizations. All the organizations and activities are independent of the state, funded by individuals and driven by volunteerism, a fact that we consider integral to our integrity and to our survival and a key to whatever success we’ve been able to achieve.

While its activities are diverse, and the politics of those involved vary quite a bit, they share common values of cooperation (as distinct from competition) and collectivity (as distinct from alienated individualism). These values are not imposed, they are embedded in the community’s history and re-enforced daily by the activity of creating and sustaining organizations that address the interests and concerns of the people building them. It is this cooperative and collective process of building new things together that allows the individuals and groups involved to grow and develop—and what they develop is a sense of their own collective power, an understanding of themselves as change agents and an ongoing connection to each other and the larger world.

Today, theorganizations that comprise the development community include:

* The All Stars Project is a national nonprofit organization with an annual budget of $10 million, all raised from individual donations and driven by volunteer labor. Active in six US cities with the mission of bringing the developmental power of performance to young people and poor communities. It sponsors four free performance-based after-school development programs for youth:
  + The All Stars Talent Show Network, where young people produce and perform in hip-hop talent shows in their neighborhoods;
  + The Development School for Youth, in which young people from poor communities learn how to perform in the business world, partnering with business leaders who lead workshops and provide paid summer internships;
  + Youth Onstage!, a free performance school and youth theatre that offers classes by volunteer professional actors, directors and choreographers;
  + Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids, which brings New York City police officers and young people of color together to play theatre games and do improv, and, in the process, create an environment for building new kinds of relationships.
  + The All Stars also supports two adult-oriented programs. The Castillo Theatre, of which I am artistic director, is a progressive political theatre with professional level production values produced almost entirely by community volunteers. It introduces about 6,000 people a year, many from poor working-class communities of color, to cutting edge political theatre.
  + The other is UX, a free university-style development school of continuing development in New York City, where adults of all ages can attend free classes, workshops and cultural outings. Its student body is drawn primarily from working class communities of color.
* Inspired by the All Stars, there are groups that are creatively imitating its approach to youth development, including London All Stars, Japan All Stars, Uganda All Stars, Street Project in Lagos, Nigeria, the Atlanta All Stars and Play Greensboro, in Greensboro, North Carolina.
* Social therapy, which unlike psychology, locates emotionality not in the heads of individuals but in the social/historical activity of human beings. Rather than drugs, analysis and/or providing various adaptive tactics and strategies, social therapy is a group practice that posits the building of the group, the environment for development, as the process of engaging emotional distress and creating emotional development. There are social therapy practices throughout the United States, with outposts in Canada, India, Greece, Mexico and South Africa.
* independentvoting org, which is spearheading legal fights against restrictive voting and electoral laws in 20 states in the U.S. and working to organize the 43% of the Americans who are neither Democrats or Republicans.
* The bi-annual Performing the World conferences, which, since 2001, has been bringing together performance activists from all over the world to NYC to network and exchange experiences
* Play, Perform, Learn, Grow, a conference and informal network in Europe, based in Thessaloniki, Greece which is led by development community organizers who have, over the last few years, been active in refugee camps throughout Europe.
* Performing Communities de Esperanza, a partnership between the Fred Newman Center for Social Therapy in Juarez, Mexico and the Institute for Improvisation and Social Action, in El Paso, Texas which is engaged in performance-oriented social activism on both sides of the border.
* The East Side Institute, an international think tank, research and education center based in New York City with 68 associates worldwide. The East Side Institute trains people all over the world in social therapeutics and performance activism through its International Class, which includes three residencies a year in New York, and through an array of ever-evolving in-person, online and Zoom classes and conversations. It founders, Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, have, between them, written 14 books, both academic and popular, Investigating and articulating the methodology that informs (and is informed by) the community’s organizing practice. The East Side Institute also includes Developing Across Borders, which, via Zoom, provides weekly social-emotional development groups to progressive social activists from over a dozen countries.

These organizations have national and international reach, with the direct participation of tens of thousands who impact on hundreds of thousands. Beyond the work in their own nation states, these organizations and individuals have built strong working relationships with community organizations, educators, activists, artists, psychologists and others in Austria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Costa Rica, Denmark, France, India, Israel, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Peru, Serbia, South Africa, Taiwan and the United Kingdom. Along with their varied foci is a shared performance-based methodology that involves people of all ages in the ongoing collective activity of creating new kinds of environments where they can be active performers of their lives.

At the same time, while I’m very proud of what we’ve built, it’s important to note right off the bat, that none of these organizations are the point. They will come and go (and over half a century of organizing many have). In fact, we work to give them away. We encourage others to take the approach, the methodology and try it their way. It’s the method, the process, the activity that is our key concern, not the perpetuation of any particular organization.

These alternative institutions and activities are not being set up outside of society’s mainstream. On the contrary, they are active in the midst of poor working-class neighborhoods in New York, Newark, Chicago, the San Francisco Bay Area and Dallas, Texas, London, Tokyo, Lagos, along the inflection points of El Paso/Juarez, and in the refugee camps in Greece. They have emerged as a response to the failure of established institutions, and they are designed to butt up against them. This is not a community that walls itself off from the rest of the world or that imagines that it can charge the world by example. It’s a community exercising power, that is, organizing groups of people to create new ways of meeting their needs, creating new wants, educating themselves, imagining and realizing new possibilities and new ways of relating to each other and the larger world. Although some elements of the development community have a long history of being involved in popular protest, as a community, it is not primarily about disruption and it isn’t best understood by what it opposes and resists. It is best understood through what it has built and is building. It’s a praxis that, in effect, attempts to address the question, “What do we do after the demonstration ends—and how?”

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The “how,” as I’ve already indicated, is performance. I’m fully aware of how odd that sounds in the context of traditional politics—Leftist or otherwise. Most of us understand performance to be what specially trained experts (actors) do on stage or screen for our entertainment. And while acting in the theatre (or its recent progeny, film and television), is certainly a major way performance is organized, over the last forty years or so, a general consensus has emerged among anthropologists, performance studies researchers and theorists, and theatre historians that performance is universal in human cultures, and not only, or even primarily, in the theatre. Rituals, whether religious (a Catholic mass, for example) or secular (a tailgate party at an American football game) are performances in which the whole social unit—the church congregation or the fans in the football stadium parking lot—take part. There is also performance involved—and this is where it is of direct concern to us here—whenever we human beings, individually or collectively, try something new. When we try a new way of relating to our spouse, or our kids, or to our boss; when we decide (or are forced) to take on a new job or trade, or defy a social convention, or attempt to interface differently with another community, we are performing. Performing, as we have come to understand it, is the universal human capacity to be who-you-are and who you-are-not (or who-you-are-becoming) at the same time. In that space, that energy, that tension, that dialectic uniting who we are and who we are becoming, we are able to try out all sorts of new social possibilities. I say *social* possibilities because performance is never done alone; it’s social activity with social (and hence cultural and political) implications.

It is this ability, we believe, that allows human beings to develop beyond instinctual and patterned behavior, including the constraints of bourgeois ideology. Fred Newman, who more than any other individual initiated and led the development community until he passed in 2011, put it this way, “We understand performance very broadly. From our point of view performance might have nothing to do with being on the stage. We think you can perform at home, at work, in any social setting…With the proper kind of support, people discover that they can, that we can, do things through performance that we never thought we could do…In a sense, we’re trying to broaden each person’s notion of ‘what you’re allowed to do.’” (Newman, 1996)

Lois Holzman, the director of the East Side Institute, and Newman’s intellectual partner, adds, “We all have the capacity to play as children do, to do what we do not yet know how to do, to be who we are and other than who we are at the same time. The babbling baby, the actor on the stage, the student in a school play, the researcher singing her data, and all of us—are capable of creating new performances of ourselves continuously if we choose to. In this way, performance is a new ontology, a new understanding of how development happens—through the social-cultural activity of people together creating new possibilities and new options for how to be in, relate to, understand and change the world – which, of course, includes ourselves.” (Holzman, 2018, p. 94)

Performance, then, is both mundane and revolutionary—and it is that contradiction that makes it so powerful as tool for generating the social imagination and realizing concrete development. Performance is a self-conscious activity, that is, you can’t do it without awareness that you’re doing it. It thus allows human beings to act and to be self-reflective of our actions at the same time (what Marx called “practical/critical”). When performing, the activity and the thought about the activity are inseparable. In the process of performance there is no separation of doing and reflecting, of practice and theory; we are the practical and the critical simultaneously. Given its inherent self-reflective nature, performance, when projected into the realm of social and political activism, consistently transforms its “theory” through the activity of its practice, and theory (self-reflectivity) constantly impacts on practice—although those terms, as distinct entities, lose much of their received meaning within the unified activity of performance. Thus, performance gives us a both a way to break out of things-as-they-are and create something new, as well as a means of reflecting on our creations as they come into existence. These are the tools that enable and inform all the organizations and activities generated by the development community.

In addition, performance, gives people a way to break out of the alienation that is the general state of being under corporate capitalism. When we are performing our focus can’t be on our static commodified identity, our “thingness,” because when we perform who and what we are is in transition. Performance, in this way, puts us in touch with our *becomingness*, with ourselves as process. It also brings to the fore the socialness of human life. An individual does not perform, it’ something you do with at least one other person, it is, to use a theatre term, an ensemble activity. This is where the activity of performance and of *community building* come together. If performance is an ensemble activity, the question of what the ensemble is that we are a performing in—and how that ensemble is built—is extremely important.

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How did we come to understand and practice this approach to performance?

If the development community was, in the historical context, birthed by the Sixties, its midwife was Fred Newman. Newman, who passed away in 2011, was born poor in the Bronx in 1935, served in the Korean War, was able to attend college on the G.I. Bill and graduate school at Stanford on fellowships. There he earned a doctorate in the philosophy of science and the foundations of mathematics. Newman spent six years teaching philosophy at various colleges and universities from which he repeatedly got fired for giving all his students “A”s, both out of a principled opposition to grades and also in order to not contribute to anyone flunking out and being drafted in fight in Vietnam. In 1968, at the height of the upheavals of the era, Newman quit his teaching job at City College in New York City, and, with a handful of student followers, set up community organizing collectives in upper Manhattan and in the Bronx. That was the move from which all else followed.

As Holzman writes, “Newman resonated with the ways in which the cultural movements of the time were challenging the Western glorification of individual self-interest, and was excited by the grassroots communal experiments to reform daily life going on at the time. He felt the need to confront America’s failure to honestly deal with its legacy of slavery and racism, as its African American population remained poor and shut out of America’s prosperity.” (Holzman, 2018, p. 87)

Like virtually all 20th Century radicals concerned with the elimination of poverty and inequality, Newman and his followers soon embraced Marxism. But from the first embrace it was obvious to Newman how philosophically underdeveloped (that is, how dumbed-down) Marxism had become since Marx and how little room Marxism, as an ideology, allowed for its own development. (Newman, 1999) In particular, Newman and his followers, emerging from the very performatory sixties with its emphasis on the unity of the personal and the political, were struck by how the subjective side of social transformation—culture, psychology, education, family organization and personal relations—had been neglected by the socialists and communists. The orthodox Marxists had focused almost exclusively on economic and political struggle leaving virtually all the social activities and institutions that shape our emotionality, our ethics and our views of who we are and what’s possible in the hands of those institutions invested in the status quo.

As Newman put it in 2005, “As a Marxist, I think the fundamental causes of oppression, exploitation and so on are economic. At the same time, I think that the form that underlying economic issues take in day-to-day life is cultural. I still hold to the view that in the ‘final analysis’ there has to be a fundamental change in the nature of the economy. However, I think, number one, that we’re a long wayfrom the ‘final analysis,’ and number two, you have to deal with the cultural form of that exploitation if you’re going to help people to do something about it. People aren’t going to go directly from how they’re currently organized culturally to radically reorganizing economic realities. So, culture is a critical day-to-day, week-to-week, year-to-year issue. In some respects, it’s more important than politics, which, in my opinion, is another form of culture in any event.” (Newman, 2005)

Therefore, while Newman and his fellow organizers not only tried the traditional forms of organizing that they inherited from the traditional Left, building unions, (the National Federation of Independent Unions, the New York City Unemployed and Welfare Council) and left wing electoral parties (the New Alliance Party), they also began developing social therapy, a non-psychological approach to therapy that, as I mentioned earlier, relates to emotionality as a social/historical creation not an inner-psychic phenomenon, and established schools with names like the Working Class Room and the Robin Hood Relearning Company as well as a theatre and gallery space called the Otto René Castillo Center for Working Class Culture. The evolution of our understanding of performance as revolutionary activity, as a method for generating new possibilities, has been the result of trial and error, but it was trial and error practiced with an eye to finding a way out the fly bottle of bourgeois conceptuality, emotionality, and, as we came to see it, the conservatizing impact of any ideology.

Our discovery of performance activism—and here, again, I want to emphasize we were not the only ones making this discovery, although we didn’t know that at the time—grew out of the decades-long cross-fertilization of the performance experiences onstage afforded our community through the Castillo Theatre and the All Stars Talent Show Network, and our study of the early Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky, a supporter of the Bolshevik Revolution, articulated a dialectical understanding of both method and human development, in particular how babies and young children learn language and other social skills.

Vygotsky’s work was introduced to our development community-in-the-making by the developmental psychologist Lois Holzman, who, when she became active in the community in the mid 1970s, was doing postgraduate work at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition at Rockefeller University, where Vygotsky’s writings were being translated into English. Among his many observations/discoveries, Vygotsky noted that infants and young children develop by playing and performing. They learn language and all the other social skills that constitute being human by creatively imitating the adults and older children around them, in Vygotsky’s words they perform “a head taller than they are.” (Vygotsky, 1978) This resonated with us far beyond the field of early childhood development. All of our work—in psychology, culture and electoral politics—had shown us that adults could continue to develop throughout the life cycle, a possibility denied by traditional developmental psychology, if they were supported to find ways of performing “a head taller than they are.” Vygotsky’s discovery of development through play and performance, along with the theatrical experience we gained in building the Castillo Theatre and the All Stars Talent Show Network, provided us with a context within which we could transform our mass organizing.

In the 1980s and ‘90s development community organizers spent long hours on the streets and subway platforms and canvassing door to door, to raise the money needed to maintain our financial (and hence creative and political) independence. We did this after work and on weekends, week after week, year after year and it posed many challenges. Some of us found the work humiliating; asking for money on the street, no matter how much we believed in the cause, *felt*, to some of us, like begging. For others (particularly men), it was difficult not to be reactive when people on the street were dismissive or hurtful. Those involved in this work came with various levels of social skill, and for some of us it was hard to even look a stranger in the eye, never mind engage them in a cultural/political conversation. It gradually occurred to us that what we were doing on the street (“street work” as we called it then) was a performance. On stage we were doing all sorts of odd things, performing characters wildly different than ourselves. Why couldn’t we do that on the street? Why did we have to “be ourselves” Why did we have to stay stuck in our already formed social roles when we were organizing and fund raising on the street? Couldn’t we create characters that built on our friendliness, humor and passion for what we were trying to build? We could and did. We began to approach this organizing activity as a performance, and that is what allowed us to sustain and develop it for so long. Even more to the point, it was one path that led us to discover the connection between performance and social (and personal) development—and performance eventually became the pedological approach of all our youth programs and our free adult university.

And so, I found myself performing with poor working-class people not only on stage at Castillo, but also on the streets of New York City, not only writing and devising scripts that told the stories and reflected the values of progressive America, but improvising conversations with all sorts of New Yorkers about working together to create new kinds of cultural activities and organizations free of the profit motive and of state funding and control. I was a trained theatre historian doing work with scores of non-theatre people, which was, quite literally, changing the inherited meaning of performance itself.

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That process, and a myriad of similar experiences, gradually led us away from ideology (and knowing) as the means of changing the world into the embrace of play and performance. Throughout its history, Marxism has been taken as an ideology. For a small but growing number of people around the world, including those of us who started and are leading the development community, Marxism is also – or alternatively – a methodology, and specifically, a methodology of human development. (Newman and Holzman, 2003; Holzman 2017)

I’ve been using the term development quite a bit; it’s a word that obviously has a lot different meanings in our culture. What do we mean by “development”? Our understanding of human development goes back to Marx’s earliest writings, In the *Economic and Political Manuscripts*and *The German Ideology*. For example, Marx speaks clearly about the social and active nature of human development, “... *as*society itself produces *man*as *man*, so it is *produced*by him. Activity and mind are social in their content as well as in their *origin*; they are *social*activity and *social*mind.” (Marx, 1967: 129) We have the capacity to actively create our development, our transformation, and that of the world, through interaction with the social environment we find ourselves in. Marx continues, “We have further shown that private property can be abolished only on condition of an all-round development of individuals, because the existing character of intercourse and productive forces is an all-round one, and only individuals that are developing in an all- round fashion can appropriate them, i.e., can turn them into free manifestations of their lives.” (Marx and Engels, 1974, p. 117)

Vygotsky, building on this ontology, understood human development as a cultural activity that people engage in together rather than as the external manifestation of an individualized, internal process. Development, according to Vygotsky, is not, as virtually all of psychology maintains, internal to the individual. It is, instead, a social activity, something that we create together. The child’s development is not primarily based on a biological clock, it grows out of the nature and quality of her/his interaction with other human beings. Social development is likewise not based on a theory of history, there is nothing inevitable about it. It happens *if* we collectively create it.

The performance approach to development, we have come to believe, is qualitatively different than ideologically-based attempts to find “alternative futures.” Ideology (be it secular or religious) is systematic set of ideas. Where can those ideas come from but from the past? Can ideas that are rooted in old ways of living and seeing, even when formulated in opposition to those ways of living and seeing, lead us to qualitatively new futures? Can we develop as a species if we are attempting to fit ourselves into a prescribed image of ourselves and the world? I would argue that the experience of the 20th Century provides a pretty definitive “no.”

And yet, historically, ideology appears to have accompanied all mass attempts to build alternative futures—and I dare say, most who consider themselves change agents today still cling to ideology in one form or another. Collective activity that challenges the world-as-it-is, that asks people to move beyond what they already know and to put their livelihoods, families and lives on the line, appears to need the comfort and support of a guidebook, a map, an ideology, be it religious or secular. These collectively constructed ideologies, once embraced, generate their own morality, traditions and language. The dialogue of philosophy, constrained within the rigid frame of ideology, becomes replaced by the (often violent) sectarianism of right and wrong/correct and incorrect/orthodox and revisionist. The ability to reflect on one’s activity becomes highly constrained and compromised as the ideology devolves into an ever more closed system. Thus speaks the 150-year history of Marxism and numerous other movements for social change from ancient to modern times.

Given this history, if we start from Marx’s humanistic and activistic (and non-ideological) premise that the point is to change the world, not interpret it, we are left with an apparent dilemma. Changing things obviously involves mass activity, however, acting *en masse*, at least up until this point in history, appears to generate and depend upon ideology, which tends toward the elimination of reflection and dialogue, thus severely handicapping the development of the activity for change.

If, as Marx writes in the “Theses on Feuerbach,” “All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice” (Marx, 1973, pp. 121-123), then how do we participate in that human practice and simultaneously comprehend/reflect on our practice in such a way that allows for its further development, unencumbered by the dead weight of ideology? Is it possible, as Marx postulated, to bridge the gap between reflecting and doing, between interpreting the world and changing the world?

That bridge is, our experience has taught us, is performance. And, I would maintain, it provides the best shot we have at not replicating the mistakes of the past, for it allows us to remix the history, the culture, the traditions we inherit into something qualitatively new. A performer has no need of ideology; a performer needs to accept the offers of her fellow performers. To the extent that those offers are accepted and built upon, something new is created. Further, because performance incorporates that which does not (yet) exist, it is an activity that is constantly, by its nature, changing the world, that is, bringing new possibilities into social existence. Performance is both mundane in the sense that it is day-to-day, moment-to-moment, and, in the long run, profound in that the totality of new human performances is nothing less than a recreation (that is, a new performance of) the world.

Nor does a performer need identity, other than to play with, deconstruct and reconfigure. She, performing with others, is always creating new versions of herself. Identity as a politic is, like the traditional version of community, backward looking and exclusionary. In the development community we take very seriously the emotional depth and historical gravitas of identity, particularly for those whose identities have been scorned and belittled in a particular culture. At the same time, we work hard to approach identity as a starting point, not an end point. It’s the raw material we have to work with, vital to whatever new we create together, but not an end in itself. We work to create environments in which we are not simply seeking to assert who we *are* but to discover what and who we might *become* through our encounter with others. What we might become, of course, draws on where we come from and who we are, but does stop with that. It transforms who we are and where we come from into something that is qualitatively new—and, hopefully, unexpected. An alternative future, it seems to us, cannot come into existence if it is simply determined by the culture and history we bring to the process of building it, it needs to be qualitatively *other* when we complete the creative project.

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As a scion of the Third International, I am acutely aware of both its heroic and its criminal legacy. I’m very conscious that any serious discussion of alternative futures can’t ignore the question of power and authority, of violence and coercion. Our approach to building alternative futures, as should be clear by now, is not based on cognition and knowing. We make no claim to knowing what that future could or even should be. We approach our organizing as an improvisation, a performative process that includes, to be sure, the communalist values we bring to it. However, we’re committed to co-creating the future with any and all who chose to create with us. The structure of the community is not preconceived; it goes where its activities lead it. In this sense, its doesn’t fit earlier organizing models such as a party (either electorial or democratic-centralist) or even a movement in that “movement” implies an internal cohesion and a specific set of goals, that our community, very deliberately, lacks.

The international development community bares family resemblances with other visions of and attempts to bring about “alternative futures.” Like both communists and social democrats, we are focused on the empowerment of the poor and on achieving economic equality. Like the counter culture and what are now often referred to as “new social movements,” we fully embrace that the “personal is political” (and visa versa) and engage the particulars of what, over the last decade or so, has come to be called the “intersectionality” of oppressions. Like anarchism and much of the “solidarity economies” around the world, all of our organizations and activities are financially and structurally independent of the state—financed and built on a voluntary basis by those who choose to do so. Indeed, we’re convinced that no qualitatively alternative future can be built without that independence.

Performance is our methodology and our praxis is using that methodology to build positive resistances within the mainstream of capitalist society. One way of understanding what we’re doing is that we’re responding to what people want to do and build. Although I don’t think anyone in our development community was aware of this quote until a few years ago, what we’ve done is very much in the spirit of a statement by the American counter cultural leader Abbie Hoffman that, “The key to organizing an alternative society is to organize people around what they can do and, more importantly, what they want to do.” (Hoffman, 2009, p.135)

Another aspect of our work is to demonstrate to people raised in our super-alienated society that something beyond alienation can exist, something other than the prescribed ways of living one’s life and doing politics is possible—and that they can do it. The building of independently funded youth programs, schools, theatres, therapy clinics, electoral reform organizations (and much, much more) is essential, we believe, for a very simple, commonsense reason—to show that it can be done. In order to move, people need a place to move to. People will vote for Democrats and Republicans (Labour or Tory; Social Democratic or Christian Democratic) if there is nothing else to vote for. Or they won’t vote at all. They will send their kids to oppressive schools if there are not more developmental schools and youth programs available to their children. They will accept the current understanding and practice of learning if they are not aware of the existence of any other. They will rely on clergy and psychology-based therapists and social workers if there is not a more developmental therapy available to deal with their family and emotional problems. The development community is working to replace state and corporate power with more developmental alternatives built through free association and voluntary funding by ordinary people from all strata of society.

The building of these independent organizations and activities is the exercise of power by those building them. As Newman and Holzman wrote in 2004, “Authority goes from the top, down. It is imposed. Most importantly, it must be known. Power comes from the bottom up. It is expressed. It is created.” (Newman, F., Holzman L. 2004, p. 74) The creation/expression/exercise of power is, at the same time, a developmental activity for the individuals and communities involved. Thus, the building of such independent organizations is simultaneously a tool and a result. (Newman, F., L. Holzman, 1993) In the process of building these independent organizations and activities, human beings build a new independent culture and recreate ourselves and our world.

Will the work of development community become a threat to the powers that be? Will the state move to destroy it? While that, of course, is to be discovered, it depends, I think, on the extent to which we have been able to give it all away, that is, on how pervasive, how deeply embedded, in the culture performance methodology has become. If the kind of performance activism I’ve been sharing with you spreads sufficiently, then there will be nothing to destroy, no organization or leaders. The deeper and more extensively performance-based methodology is integrated into the mainstream of society, the less likely it will be that authority will be able to root out or significantly reverse that which, hopefully, will have become a conceptual revolution and a new way of living.

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As I said at the top, I’m not an academic, and while I wouldn’t expect anyone here to adhere to the dogma of objectivity, I make no apologies for the lack of objectivity of these reflections. What I have shared with you is an understanding from *within* a history, an activity, a group, a culture. I realize that this is a different kettle of fish than a “knowing-what” or “knowing-how.” As I also said at the top, I was raised a third generation communist, and while that particular label, at least in its orthodox sense, may no longer accurately describe me, I’m gratified to be able to share with you a new branch of our common progressive heritage that you might not have been aware of. I look forward to your thoughts, reactions and questions and to beginning a conversation on this alternative road toward an alternative future.

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