

To Venus with Zeitgeist

BEFORE THE CLOSE of the nineteenth century Oscar Wilde could see the technical possibility of abolishing most, if not all, hard, boring, or repetitive work. In 1891 Wilde published his brilliant essay, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. In it he conceived of a world without hard labour. He predicted that, “just as the trees grow while the country gentleman is asleep”, so all the nasty and unrewarding work would in future be done by machines. He looked forward to a time when all of humanity would be liberated from hard labour, and would be able to live the leisured and creative life which he himself enjoyed before he was destroyed by persecution and shameful imprisonment.

Wilde knew this was a dazzling utopian idea, but he insisted that, “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at.” I was reminded of all this last week when I encountered a street stall promoting The Zeitgeist Movement. I was surprised because I had only encountered this organization on the Internet, but there they were, a bunch of young people on Market Street, with leaflets and booklets, and much eager talk, promoting something very much like Oscar Wilde’s dream; they were standing for a world in which we would be rescued from money and politics by technological innovation, in fact by machinery.

Their organization, The Zeitgeist Movement, is the activist wing of The Venus Project. The slogan of the movement is “Beyond Poverty, Politics and War”. It is international and has few, if any links, to other elements or political traditions within the anti-capitalist movement. What they share is the thought that another world is possible. They are committed to a kind of atheistical spirituality in which technical advance and the perfection of machines will, while

solving all of our social ills, save the planet and its natural systems from irreversible degradation and decay.

In this they certainly flow with the intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of the times – the zeitgeist; the remarkable aspects of their outlook are a solid belief that only technology can save us and the planet, and that rational human beings are perfectly capable of bringing a better future into existence without the aid of atavistic religious or chauvinistic prejudices. Thus far, I am with them one hundred per cent, and am surprised by their appearance upon my horizon. It is perfectly true that it is only through scientific research and technological advance that we can hope to put an end to endemic poverty *and* solve our environmental problems. We are indeed at a neo-Malthusian turning point – either we solve the technical bottlenecks – that prevent the production of clean energy and sustainable urbanization – or we will go under during the course of this century.

So far, so good; however The Zeitgeist Movement runs into trouble by extending the capacities of machines from overcoming technical problems to the abolition of money, politics, inequality, and hierarchy. They call for nothing less than government by computer: “The Venus Project calls for a cybernated society in which computers could replace the outmoded system of electing politicians”. This is not *Brave New World* or *Terminator 2*, but a kind of anarcho-communist vision in which an “electronic autonomic nervous system” would coordinate all machinic systems in the service of humanity and abolish the need for money, barter, and politics by using machines to create a world in which material goods and services would be so abundant and perfected that all the pressures towards greed, hoarding, and disunity would dissolve.

In this they have done more than dissolve the difference between utopia and dystopia, they have dissolved the distinction between technical problems and the problems of social relations. The Venus

Project through Zeitgeist is committed to spreading the idea that social relations are merely ideological – all we need to do is change our minds and the minds of enough other people and we will be able to abolish money, transform the manner in which technical innovation occurs, and alter forever the way that wealth is distributed.

They will do this by inaugurating a Resource-Based Economy. Indeed they are so committed to this concept that they have trademarked it. The Resource-Based Economy is basically an economy rooted in the production of what Marx would have called “use-values” – in The Resource-Based Economy commodities would disappear and be replaced by the production of goods for *need*, not *exchange*. Consequently, money and barter would no longer exist and people would be able to obtain whatever they needed from depots or distribution centres kept supplied by advanced technological systems maintained by “design teams using integrated computers”.

The “design teams” would be working in compliance with the “blueprint” and the “international planning council” tasked with translating the blueprint into reality upon a global basis. It is not explained why the drawing up of the “blueprint”, the operation of the “design teams” or the decisions of the “international planning council” would not simply be politics by another name. The assumption appears to be that because what needs to be done is so manifestly self-evident all that is needed is technical discussion on how to implement the plan.

In this utopian world there would be no need for a means of exchange or a measure of value like money. There would be no need to assess the quality and quantity of goods required, or to consider how to distribute them – decisions about who gets what, how much, at what quality, and when – would simply be taken out of our hands by the logic of the blueprint and the operation of the integrated computer systems.

The Zeitgeist Movement and The Venus Project have a four-point plan. Phase One is a research project that is already underway on a 25-acre site at Venus, Florida in which model housing, model transportation systems, and model cities are already being created in model form. Phase Two is raising sufficient money to make a feature length movie designed to provide a vision of our peaceful future. Phase Three is the building of an “experimental research city” in which the ideas and technologies of the moneyless city will be put into practice. Phase Four will be the planning and construction of a “theme park that will both entertain and inform visitors about the possibilities for humane and environmentally friendly life-styles.”

You might think that this risks the Disneyfication of utopia, and you might be right. However, what is most striking about the four-point plan is the miss-match between the vaulting ambition of the ideas for a new world and the tawdry modesty of the implementation, the registered trade marks, the *Tomorrow's World* architectural plans, the table-top Perspex models, and the \$200 tours of The Venus Project at Venus, Florida. Some people think that it is all a confidence trick to relieve the gullible of their hard-earned cash. Personally, I doubt it.

Both the people running Zeitgeist and Venus, and those attracted to their blueprint for the future are hooked on the same dream and the same illusion, that there is some way of improving the world by bypassing our existing social relations and the economic and political arrangements to which they give rise. Capitalism cannot be wished away or planned out of existence. The specific forms of property, the relationship between those, and the way in which political arrangements are ordered, and the role, which the development of technology plays within this system, need to be thoroughly grasped before a way out of the intricate historical maze in which we find ourselves can be found.

Zeitgeist and The Venus Project are a product of a political culture in which the plans and the blueprints of the powerless are thrown up against the imagined plots and conspiracies of those in power. The only way of putting a stop to this nonsense is to develop a thorough going understanding of capitalism as a real cultural formation – not as a conspiracy, but a real way of life – in which we must struggle to find concrete ways in which to strengthen social solidarity in order to defeat the winner-takes-all tendencies within the system.

This cannot be achieved by pronouncements concerning the evils of money or the abolition of politics and politicians. Nor can it be achieved by the fraudulent rhetoric of the “Big Society” promoted by Cameron & Company. Dog-eat-dog capitalism can only be genuinely confronted by means that challenge the simple capitalist logic of value expansion in the provision of goods and services.

We need the development of cooperative organizations, and of course, sustained struggles to ensure that the resources of the democratic state are deployed in the public interests of society as a whole. We need a politics of cooperation in which all the practical resources and imaginative capacities of people can be mobilised to narrow the options of the capitalist system and of individual capitalists, in order to prevent them from simply ruling the roost through their private possession of private capital.

Capitalism first arose more or less spontaneously within the heartland of an older set of social arrangements – perhaps a newer more cooperative form of society can arise within the heartland of capitalist society by the systematic strengthening of the co-operative production of goods and services and employment? I’m not really sure; but I am absolutely certain that the Perspex table-top models at The Venus Centre in Florida, and the eager advocacy of the abolition of money by The Zeitgeist Movement represent yet another blind alley to traipse along for those driven barmy by capitalism.