

## Reflection. Spirit of Life Fellowship, Kirribilli

April 15, 2018

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Some of us may identify philosophically, politically, spiritually as progressives but generally, in Australia or the United States, we know that there is a line, of sorts, to our left that one crosses with caution. The clearest way to cross that line is to start talking about Karl Marx and Marxism .....or to throw around the words colonialist and imperialist. We may be progressive but many are wary of that leftist Marxist fringe whom we suspect are mostly ideologues gone too far - university students or academics who don't really know enough about the practical world.

Well today I would like to bring up some Marxist critique and some colonialist conspiracies as a part of a reflection. This in connection to a term that has captured my imagination over the past few weeks and I hope might be of interest to you also. It is a term from the writer Peter Hershcock. It is the term "the colonization of consciousness." I am using it this morning as a way to reflect on just how much information technology has invaded our lives and is plundering our attention. To use a Marxist phrase: it has made a commodity of our attention.

Over against that I hope this talk might highlight the incredible importance of a deep and abiding spiritual principle. It's a principle that one finds upheld and articulated in every religious tradition. I think perhaps the poet and artist, William Blake, stated it most eloquently even though it was made famous (or infamous) by Aldous Huxley - it relates to the process of "cleansing the doors of our perception." If we take nothing away from this morning may we at least take away a curiosity about what it means to be aware and alert as to the "doorways" or the thresholds of our perception.

Every time I have found myself in some ritual of aboriginal heritage which starts with the smoking ceremony to clear the space. Or, participated in some rite of nature-based spirituality in which each participant is invited to enter through the smoke of burning sage as a preparation, I have wondered how we became so loose, so squandering, so uncaredful with the conditions in which we live and in which we abide. How much there is a need for cleansing our spaces, our relational venues and the settings and processes wherein we offer our attention.

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Jo Confino wrote for the Guardian in September, 2013 about an event that I remember following with a lot of interest at the time.

He writes: “Why on earth are many of the world's most powerful technology companies, including Google, showing a special interest in an 87-year-old Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk?”

The answer is that all of them are interested in understanding how the teachings of [Thich Nhat Hanh](#),.... can help their organisations to become more compassionate and effective.

In a sign that the practice of mindfulness is entering the mainstream, Thay, as Thich Nhat Hahn is known by his followers, has been invited later this month to run a full day's training session at Google's main campus in California.

He plans to discuss with them how they can develop a deep understanding of the interconnectedness and inter-dependence of all life and offer practical tools to better integrate mindfulness in their daily work, in the products they design, and in the vision they have for how technology can change the world. The event will end with the practice of walking meditation.”

I am sure that many of us here may have experienced the practice of walking meditation. It is walking as a sacred act. Thay, who sometimes came to Vermont and invited people to walk with him, through the fields of the monastery, speaks of it as kissing the ground with your feet. I am always a little puzzled to hear a lifelong monk speaking about kissing. But there it is - it symbolizes an act of gentleness and care and affection. It is no coincidence that Thay would invite his hosts at Google to do a walking meditation with him. It was a way to symbolize the importance of care for the processes of perception – in this place that has everything to do with our current crisis of thresholds, privacy and exploitation.

It was interesting to hear three months later, Thay speaking about his visit to Silicon valley when he returned to Plum Village, in southern France, where he lives in community with 160 monks and nuns. It seemed the visit to silicon valley was cut short out of a fundamental divergence of purpose. At that end-of-year gathering, at home again, Thay spoke candidly about his growing conviction during the visit to silicon valley that what google and others had really invited him for, and what the leadership were mostly interested in, was how mindfulness practice could increase productivity and improve Google's competitive edge – through better attentiveness to the work on the part of the employees, some hope of a half magical, new method by which people could access more breakthrough innovative ideas, and staff retention brought about by the impression that google was a cool place to work – ‘look we invited a famous Buddhist monk and we are into mindfulness meditation.’

“They wanted me to help them be number 1,” Thay said in his quiet, thoughtful way, “to show them how to use mindfulness meditation to make more money. ‘If that is your purpose’, I said to them, ‘and that is your motivation for inviting me, than I am sorry, I can't help you. I can only help you if you are interested in heightening the level of true happiness, compassion and kindness for and among yourselves and your workers, if you are interested doing less damage in the world, and exploring how technology could be a force for bringing about less suffering’.”

This talk is about technology and more specifically about high-tech media. You have, no doubt, all heard thousands of critiques of technology and media and maybe engaged in a few of your own, when some device that is supposed to be so easy and so common sense has taken up way too much of valuable parts of your day with the promise of something that you really have to have .....but the common sense is not forthcoming and you are starting to wonder if there may be some place where one could live off the grid and free of the complicated obligation to be techno-connected.

Thich Nhat Hahn's experience at Google, or the current problems facing the Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, or for that matter the painful to watch and witness shaming and exposure that Steve Smith and the Australian cricket team have recently been put through, or going back to last August, when we were once again reminded of the sad conditions under which Princess Di came to the end of her brief life chased by predatory paparazzi, these are all symptoms - the tip of the iceberg - of something much larger that is causing critical, meaningful and growing dysfunctions. **Our attention has become a commodity and incredible amounts of wealth have come to be associated with the capturing and holding of our attention.**

We should really give Karl Marx far more credit for how he mapped out this process in its earlier stages. It is prophetic/cautionary/insightful in as meaningful and **relevant** way as any prophecy that I have read. We are prone to say it is economic/political but it is much more than that. Our schools in Australia and in the US never taught us Marx except to associate him with the corruption that was the Soviet dictatorship and others like it. But Marx looked at wealth accumulation and what is referred to as the "free" market and identified ways in which it is not free at all. Freedom is probably the most convoluted term we could associate with it. In tracing the history of the free market, Marx showed how violent a process it has been all along and how much exploitation and not exchange have been its hallmark. He called it the "hidden abode" of capitalism - and what he was trying to do was encourage people to assess the true cost of the capitalist system.

Feminist thought has since added another layer of the "hidden abode" - informed by the highly gendered valuing of what was (and still to a great extent is) and what is not compensated by a fair wage. "Expropriation" in this thought exposes the profound subsidies provided by the work, the efforts and the institutions without which the market could not operate and yet which the market takes for granted and treats with brash disregard in ways that are at least highly disrespectful and maybe even constitute outright theft rather than a fair exchange of equivalents.

So is it an issue of fairness? Of propriety? Of valuation? Of trust? Or more than that even, is it an issue of knowing what we want to pass on to our children? Of survival and of dignity? An issue of how we view our purpose and our destiny as individuals and as communities?

As I mentioned earlier I have been curious about the author Peter Herschok's term "the colonization of consciousness."

The term colonization is indicative here. It derives from the Latin *colonus* or “farmer.” It implies a beneficent activity by which a land and its people are cultivated. Tamping down what is wild, chaotic and instead making it productive. It is interesting to note the timing of the colonial pursuits of European shipping powers within the momentum of the capitalist system. It is interesting also to note the close link in colonial traditions between missionaries and military expeditions. (Religion is paying the price for that distractedness now. But rather than responding with a positive, relevant and meaningful vision of improvement, religion, to such a great extent, continues to cow tow to the colonialist and capitalist way, preoccupied with its own market share of ignorant of that which is worthy of honour and so badly in need of advocacy.

In the colonialist tradition both the militant and the religious offer a moral justification – a practical, evangelical humanism - by which the colonized received the benefits of not only the land being cultivated but also the people. Christian “farmers” and colonial administrators possessed almost magical powers that were used for passive-aggressive control.

In both cases, patterns of interdependence - relating a people to one another, their dieties and the spirits of nature were actively replaced by something transcendent that the colonized themselves actually chose allegiance to – adopting a subservient role on the basis of having been convinced not only of the desirability of what the colonial power offers but often of their own material and spiritual poverty.

It was the breakdown of culture and language (because the language of improvement can only be the colonists) that liberates economic energy. It supplants the unique and varied traditions and aspirations, methods and tools of the colonized in favour of a dependance on the superior expertise and tools and narrative orientations of the colonist.

It is an amazing amount of control.

It is an amazing amount of uniformity.

It appears to be liberating – offering various freedoms from constraint - not only physically but intellectually and spiritually. With it often comes a reinforcement of a very theological and very western premise – the inherently autonomous nature of the self. You decide for yourself. You have choices – options. But do you? Are you exercising those options?

In so many studies that have been done, indigenous elders have looked back over the process of modernization and capitalist integration and been asked to compare the benefits and the drawbacks. Invariably they identify a process, not of liberation but of deadening.

Here again Marx’s critique is insightful. There have always been markets but what is unique about capitalism? It is capitalism’s thrust towards itself – towards more capital – an insatiable drive towards unending expansion - an objective that takes priority over any other considerations. And in the process everything is commodified. Owner and

producer are harnessed as pawns figuring out in the grinding of the system how to feed the beast.

“Mr. Zuckerberg, was your personal information harvested”? (the question was asked in the hearings this week) Hmm, tough question and I can't imagine that his lawyers did not prepare him carefully for this. “Yes. Yes. I am one of you. The system got me too.”

Our information technologies are actually an unbroken lineage of the colonialist tradition – some say a maturation of colonial intent. It is no longer a colonization of land as was true of the early colonialism but of consciousness. Not a direct plundering of material resources as it is a co-opting and plundering of attention. And we have chosen allegiance – adopting a subservient role on the basis of having been convinced not only of the desirability of what the information offers but often of our own material (and with that inevitably) spiritual, poverty. It sounds like pure economics but it is much, much more than economics.

Young women in Nepal no longer know who Lakshmi was but they are intimately familiar with the details of Kim Kardashians closet. Young men in Sudan who were once happy to learn the art of animal husbandry want a fast car like JayZ and are willing to cross the mediterranean in any kind of vessel to pursue it. A generation of profoundly malleable and naive young people have been cultivated so that their wants and desires have efficiently been stripped of communal meaning and intimacy-refining conduct towards an aspiration of private experiences that are located elsewhere and make them feel like they need to fix everything about themselves.

Wealth has come to mean the holding of attention. And as was true of the earlier pattern, the promise of enrichment seems to offer short term intrigues but the flow of wealth continues to wreak growing inequality.

The cost seems so low – nothing more than our attention – readily available and almost infinitely (we think) replaceable. Access to everything for practically nothing. No wonder it leaves us clamouring for more.....never suspecting that we are actually losing more than we ever stand to gain.

Now that is not a claim that ought to be made without being questioned. Are we losing more than we gain? Using the lens of the colonial intent and the colonizing tradition may be helpful in asking questions about our current technological salvation. Perhaps that is most what is needed and certainly an important first step – a serious process of reflection and increased awareness.

If we claim that technology gives us greater freedoms, **how can independence and liberation make us so incredibly dependent?**

How is it that these systems promise so much diversity and attention to personal creativity and difference while so significantly undermining modes of personhood and interrelatedness, connection to local traditions, languages and relationships?

How is it that this is purported to foster the celebration of things diverse and unique but in fact the opposite seems to be true – not only posing an incredible threat to cultural and ethnic diversity but biological and ecological diversity as well?

If the system can deliver so much wealth to those at the top that they are eagerly looking to invest their surplus in second and third homes and driving \$200k cars than why is health care so underserved and disability support always begging for what it needs? Why are teachers and child carers paid so poorly.

In some ways the automobile is a metaphor. Plenty of research has shown that the fact that we can get places faster doesn't mean that we spend less time commuting. What it does mean is that we go twice as many places. All of a sudden (more or less) we need to go to so many more places. Invariably, in every place such a study is done the reports show that people spend more time commuting – not less. Are our lives improved? Yes, of course, yes. But why do we not seem to be able to retain those things that we always valued most?

There are solutions to these issues and questions. Those solutions are not either/or scenario's – trying to disconnect from the world wide web in this day and age would be like jumping off a fast moving train. But it important for us to more closely examine and understand our own wants and desires.

Perhaps there are solutions in gaining better clarity of who we value and cherish in our lives and what would it mean to prioritize those meaningful relationships and not let anything get in the way of that.

Buy less. Reuse more. Raw materials are not infinite and free as the market would have us believe and nature is not a waste dump endlessly taking the byproducts of our consumption. Be prepared and satisfied with something that does not depend on undending and unsustainable growth in economic activity.

Let's be creative about our home spaces bringing back the artisanal skills, learnings new ones that benefit our family and our community in some way that is relevant.

Let's take care of one another better. Make time for that. Because obviously those making decisions about the surplus of our collective efforts and resources, which the system calls profit, do not seem eager to allocate enough of that surplus in hospitals and care facilities and places where people are unwell or disabled.

Let's let teachers know we value their work. And let's help young people value the profession of teaching and community service.

Let's attend the local meeting. It can be contentious and rowdy and people get angry at each other but we can bring kindness and speak for the importance of public institutions that are not for sale to the highest bidder but are places of hope - taking back to the local level and to a human scale the processes of democratic dialogue and decision making.

And keep this little fellowship of Unitarians Universalists alive and well. I increasingly realize how hard it is for many Australians to imagine that such a religion exists and that it is recognized on the list of recognized denominations. And that a faith in people and respectful processes and an embrace of diversity can actually be called a religion.

I hear it so many times: but that's not religion.

And I often say: that is what religion is meant to be.

## Notes:

Does the market attribute a fair value to the "work" (although many of us may even be reticent to call it work) that makes stability possible, that makes public institutions viable, that prepare the worker from the earliest days, that take care of the sick and disabled, that provides care for the aged? Without these things the market couldn't function. But the "free" market has taken those things to be indeed "free" or highly subsidized. It offers some concessions to charity, some taxes....if one couldn't get away with not paying a tax - but essentially this is not the market's business.

Does the market attribute a fair value to the natural resources that it uses as raw material? Does it consider the equitable exchange for using nature as a dump for the waste that are generated in the process of industry? These things the market considers to be endless and abundant and indeed "free".

Nancy Fraser, a highly respected and active philosopher in this area has highlighted three areas of our social system and society which illustrate the processes of "expropriation": social reproduction (schools and institutions where we pass on to the next generation what we value and who we are), the relationship of human to non-human life, the public sphere (dialogue and political processes)

Karl Marx questioned the sphere of exchange and pointed to the "hidden abode" of production.

1. **Private property** and the means of production which presupposes a class division between the owners and the workers. This emerges out of a breakup of a social order in which all people, however they might be situated, had access to the commons and the means of production or at least subsistence without having to go through labour markets. Enclosure fenced off the commons, abrogated the majority's customary use rights and transferred control of shared resources into the private ownership of a small minority. As a result those who produced wealth must sell their labour as a commodity on the market in order to get access to the things they need in order to support their families.
2. The free market in **labour**, when used in the capitalist system, generates value in excess of its own cost which necessitates determining how societies surplus will be invested. How the surplus is used raises fundamental issues about how

people want to live. How they will use their collective energies, what do they want the balance between work and family life etc. to be. How they aspire to relate to non human nature which includes what they intend to leave to future generations. Capitalism transfers these decisions to the owners who appropriate the surplus and invest it into the market (growth) with the aim of maximizing accumulation.

3. **Self expanding value.** Capitalism is peculiar. Objective systemic thrust or directionality – which constrains the owners as well as the producers - namely the accumulation of capital . Everyone’s reference to meeting their needs is indirect and harnessed to something that takes priority – capitalisms own drive to unending expansion. In a capitalist society capital itself becomes the subject . Human beings are pawns figuring out in the grinding of the system how they can get for themselves what they need by feeding the beast.
  4. The role of the **markets:** Allocate all the major inputs to commodity production – not just labour but natural resources, real estate, skill, information, machinery, credit, stability. Allocating these inputs into the system, capitalism transforms them into commodities. – the production of commodities by means of commodities. It is important to note that it relies on a background of non-commodities.
- The average westerner now watches 22.000 commercials a year
  - 75% of network advertising time is paid for by the 100 largest corporations (450,000 registered in the US)
  - Worldwide the amount of \$ spent on corporate advertising exceeds the total \$ spent on education at all levels in all countries combined. (this does not include the costs of indirect advertising through film and television).