

introduction do it yourself

The Trapeze Collective

Everyday, everywhere, through spontaneous and planned actions, people are changing the world, together. These everyday actions come from the growing desire to do it ourselves – plant vegetables, organise a community day to get people involved in improving where we live, expose exploitative firms, take responsibility for our health, make cups of tea in a social centre, figure out how to install a shower powered by the sun, make a banner, support strikers, pull a prank to make someone laugh, as well as think.

This book is a call to get involved in practical action and reflection to create more sustainable and fairer ways of living. Part handbook, part critique, it is designed to inform, inspire and enable people – you, the person sitting next to you on the train, your neighbour, your mother, your children – to take part in a growing movement for social change. It is us that can make the changes and it is us that will have to.

We believe that this social change is best understood through experiences and real human stories, not abstract ideas. Nine different themes are explored in this book where people are struggling to wrestle back control and build more equitable and just societies – *sustainable living, decision making, health, education, food, cultural activism, free spaces, media and direct action*.

This is not a book about a grand unfolding of a new theory on social change or a way to sign up to membership of a political party or campaign group – ‘Give us £10 and we’ll save the world for you’. It is not a restatement of what is wrong with the world (there are many fantastic books out there that do that already) or about the need to overthrow governments or take the reins of political power. It’s about what we can all do about the challenges we face in the world and how we can make governments and corporations increasingly irrelevant.

Although there is a sense of urgency about what we are saying, there are huge challenges that stand in the way of empowering people to take control collectively. The process won’t necessarily be easy and this book does not intend to glamorise what

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the editors and contributors know can be very hard work. While the book talks about the urgent need for change there are a number of tensions to deal with in making these ideas more accessible and less intimidating to people. There are also many competing voices and visions in the struggle for a better world. Stating the case for managing our own world collectively is difficult as many people ask why they should get involved when there are paid politicians to do so. Not only have people deferred responsibility to leaders and bosses but they are mostly distracted by getting on with their lives, by consumerism, celebrities and the humdrum of daily life.

In response, this book has no easy answers but starts from a premise that there is a growing awareness that change is needed and that the way to make it relevant is by mixing resistance and creativity in to a powerful movement that is part of everyday life. As mass protests against the current economic system have ricocheted around the world from Seattle to Cancun, beyond the spectacle of the banners, tear gas and riots, when the streets become silent again, ordinary people are doing extraordinary things, learning by doing, imagining and building the blocks of other possible worlds. We can resist the world we live in while at the same time creating the world we want to see. These small acts are the bedrock for real social transformation – as the phrase goes ‘be the change you want to see’. They are the starting points for bringing us together to build our lives outside the logic of capitalism.

if you're not pissed off, you're not paying attention!

Have you ever had the feeling that something is very wrong with the world? Maybe it is the escalating war in the Middle East, or the war on terror (what many call the war of error), people and communities divided by fear and mistrust of each other, that 20 per cent of the world's population use 80 per cent of the world's resources, the potential of catastrophic climate change. Perhaps it is bullying bosses, working long hours for poor wages, while multinationals continue to bleed people and their lands for profit. Maybe it's because public services are being privatised and politicians don't listen, penthouse lofts replace public spaces and house prices soar whilst the majority live in a constant spiral of debt. Or that cases of cancer and stress related diseases, mental illness and depression continue to grow. How have we got to this point?

In twenty-first century democracies, the way that we are supposed to change something or do 'anything' is to vote – our lifetime's supply of democracy is ten crosses on a ballot paper. Don't worry, commentators say, our political representatives will make the changes we want for us, all we need to do is write to our elected representative and ask them. Yet politicians cannot solve the problem because they are an

intrinsic part of the problem, influenced by big business, the possibility of advancing their careers and becoming directors of multinationals, they are at the heart of rotten political systems that largely serve free market policies of neoliberalism.

It is no wonder then that voting has declined and cynicism and apathy have grown as politicians move further away from the everyday needs and desires of people. Politicians seem out of our control as they respond to multinational corporations or institutions like the World Trade Organisation, International Monetary Fund and World Bank whilst unfair trade, poverty and pollution continue unabated.

The voices that dare to say that it is the economic system which is the underlying reason for inequality, climate change and environmental degradation are often disregarded as extremists. The large lobbying non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charities are able to tell us about the problems, but are unable or unwilling to challenge the root causes of these problems for fear of losing memberships and consequentially their funding. As Robert Newman asserted in the *Guardian* (2 February 2006): “Many career environmentalists fear that an anti-capitalist position is what is alienating the mainstream from their irresistible arguments. But is it not more likely that people are stunned into inaction by the bizarre discrepancy between how extreme the crisis described and how insipid the solutions proposed?”

One of the biggest crises that we face is the loss of the commons – the common assets that we have built up through centuries of struggle. All of us are facing what is called a ‘new enclosure’ where our communities and lives are enclosed and privatised as they are stripped of the items essential for life – be it clean water, access to decent education, affordable housing, or enough land to grow food. The problems of a global economy based on fossil fuelled infinite growth can seem overwhelming. But its inherent unsustainability can give energy for creating new ways of looking at the world and organising society. The questions, ideas and potential solutions that the contributors of this book pose explore these possibilities.

everyday revolutions

And we live in unnatural times.

And we must make them

Natural again

With our singing

And our intelligent rage.

(Nobel Laureate Ben Okri, for Ken Saro-Wiwa, 1995)

There are many different words and traditions that could be used to describe where this book is coming from. Our focus concerns 'doing it ourselves'. It is about a revolution that takes place everyday amongst all of us rather than some huge event led by a small vanguard in a hoped-for future. Not waiting for bosses, politicians or experts to take the initiative but building at the grassroots – empowering ourselves and improving our own realities – not to become individual entrepreneurs or free-marketers, but to work together to make open, sustainable and equal societies.

The principles of the book largely follow anarchist/autonomist thought. *Anarchism*, from the Greek 'without government', is a belief that people can organise society for themselves without formalised government. It argues that the best way to organise is through voluntary arrangements where people are likely to co-operate more. The word *autonomy* is from the Greek 'to self-legislate'. It originates from a strong European tradition, especially Italian and German, and more recently Argentinian, where experiments of how people organise their own lives are widespread.

Another influence of the book is the 'movement of movements', the term that is applied to the loose network of hundreds of social movements, groups and thousands of people who are part of what is widely known as the movement for global social and environmental justice. This book draws on the links, projects, influences and connections between groups throughout the world who make up these movements. The connections are unpredictable and fast changing, but they allow a huge amount of ideas and experiences to be exchanged around the globe. These movements are diverse and are not looking to build global federations or leaderships. That would repeat the mistakes of the past and the present. But there are some common principles which most would agree with: a rejection of borders and nation states, along with wars, exploitation and injustice; reducing over-consumption and the imbalance in the distribution of the world's resources; working towards societies that uphold the dignity of all and the inclusion of everybody; and the promotion of equality and action in everyday life to take back control.

Why do people get involved in such ideas? Often what motivates us are emotional responses – anger, fear, passion, desperation and hope. We all have a right to be angry at injustice, at oppression. Building movements and groups of change is about using this anger constructively. Not falling into traps of hate, powerlessness, blame and desperation but turning those emotions into ones of defiance and strength, hope and inspiration and to intelligent rage.

This book is an advocate for fundamental change, not for seizing power but challenging the way power operates and is linked to wealth and private power in our society. The past has shown us that often seizing power has meant replicating the very systems of oppression that revolutionary movements have struggled to

overthrow. In creating fundamental change we need to use a range of methods and tactics and in this our imaginations are our only limitations. There's no simple cause and effect – thinking that if I do this, then that will happen. Many people carry a heavy burden of expectation, waiting for the 'big day' or the 'revolution' after which everything will be alright. The reality is much slower and unpredictable, there's no straight path to where we want to go, change means constantly evolving, questioning and exploring.

On an everyday level there will always be contradictions and compromises. We might feel alienated by consumerism and work but we seem to have little choice but still be a part of them. Often our lives straddle the real world where we live and work and the ones we dream about and see occasional glimpses of. Of course sometimes it's necessary that we get formal employment, take a flight, buy corporate goods, compromise our ideals. Other times there's scope to be more independent, confrontational and defiant. Asking people to choose between these positions is divisive and unhelpful. Doing something is better than doing nothing at all. Collective organising will not get rid of inequalities overnight or change some of the most destructive things about this world but there are concrete steps that we can all take on the path to moving towards our hopes and visions and to claiming some control over our lives. The experiences reflected in this book show that people are chipping away at the present and building new worlds from inside and outside. The ways of organising our lives, which we look at in this book, can help us realise our potential, create new bonds and offer new answers, and it is there that the potential lies.

competing voices for change

Brian: Excuse me. Are you the Judean People's Front?

Reg: Fuck off! We're the People's Front of Judea.

(Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, 1979)

The arena of struggle for social change is jam packed with competing groups – all with different versions of how the world could be, and how we could get there. A little like the caricatures of Monty Python's 'Life of Brian', there are divisions, suspicion and distrust between those on the left. There is often little that unifies them with groups only coming together when there is a common enemy such as a meeting of the G8 or anti-war protests. It is certainly true that socialists, communists, Trotskyists, anarchists, ecologists, or libertarians all differ in terms of tactics and ideas as to where power lies, who is to blame, what is to be done, and how it can be

done – creating a massive range of responses and groups. The Social Forum meetings and the autonomous decentralised events occurring alongside, the People's Global Action meetings and the many other global gatherings and seminars that take place regularly, have become places for a multitude of voices and responses to meet and exchange ideas.

One of the biggest divisions is between what are sometimes called 'verticals' and 'horizontal'. Verticals usually refer to large and centralising socialist party politics, with a clear leadership or vanguard who aim to mimic and ultimately seek government as a vehicle to achieve emancipation for the masses. They seek to incorporate all 'left' protest movements into their party political model and act as 'the' voice of resistance. Verticals see horizontals as naïve and poorly organised and have often sought to take over their campaigns and take glory for their successes.

Horizontals suggest embedding change in everyday life by rejecting leaders, hierarchy, authority, centralisation and manifestos. Within horizontal politics there is no real desire to take the reigns of state power for fear of repeating its mistakes and taking on its violent tendencies. However, rejecting leaders and clear organisational structures can mean that groups become scattered, and virtually hidden from the public at large. One of the easy criticisms aimed at horizontals is that without leaders and significant organisational structures little can be achieved to really tackle power imbalances. The public and the media often look for them and when found lacking cry that horizontal movements are disorganised and powerless. But this type of coherence is not what many groups aspire to. They prioritise the process – real or direct democracy – more than the end. It is a process which is always in the making. It does and should look messy and unfinished. This rough and readiness is a central part of the politics of horizontality. It is a choice that nobody can represent you. Behind these caricatures, there are actually many shades of grey on both sides, with a history of groups often pragmatically working together on campaigns, publications and meetings.

Those also committed to self-organising must respond to models of left-wing leadership which do offer tangible results. Latin America has a history of popular leaders from Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Chile and now Bolivia where traditional people power, left-wing movements and military might have brought significant improvements to ordinary people. They have become an exciting cause célèbre for those looking for answers due to their stand against neoliberal policies and the geopolitical ambitions of the United States. In our excitement we shouldn't embrace them uncritically but see what lessons they have for us to manage our own lives. In the last instance we can't rely on military men for our freedoms unless they are prepared to hand over real power to ordinary people.

Additionally, the messages from both established left groups and more horizontal libertarian groups face tough competition from more right-wing and populist groups who advocate self-management in an attempt to take back some kind of control. Both nationalist groups like the British National Party (BNP) and fundamentalist religious groups (both Islamic and Christian) spring to mind. This book does not advocate for such groups. It is important to reclaim a vocabulary of self-management and autonomy from organisations that look inward and seek to control people, lands and resources through violence, dogma and fixed notions of who is in and out, or good and evil, rather than allowing people to govern themselves in free, open societies.

inspirations and struggles

These ideas haven't been plucked out of the air but are part of vibrant, interconnected and often contradictory movements based on rich veins of thought including Marxism, anarchism, syndicalism, socialism, Zapatismo, ecology and anti-capitalism to name a few. History gives us many inspirations: the Diggers, who established a land-based community during the English civil war, the Paris Commune in the French revolution of 1871, intentional land-based communities formed in response to the excesses of industrialism, self-organised militias during the Spanish civil war, students on the barricades in May 1968. Latin America has always stood as an inspiration for those struggling against oppression, and in its attempts to stand up against US geopolitics from Allende in Chile and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The *piquetero* and unemployed movements in Argentina and the Zapatista autonomous municipalities in the Chiapas state of Mexico are some of the most inspirational examples of how resistance and creativity in Latin America is developing.

There are other more contemporary examples across Europe, such as squatting movements, housing co-operatives, rural and urban sustainable living projects, and radical art and social centres, info shops and bookstores, traveller and free party scenes. We have also seen a growth of strands of 'anti-capitalists', 'anti-globalisers' and the 'global social justice movement' which have now entered into the language of the mainstream media. These clumsy labels at least refer to a growing awareness that people are opposing a broader system of inequality which has a long history. Horizontal networks such as People's Global Action, Reclaim the Streets, Earth First! Permaculture networks, Free Schools, and No Borders groups have spread across the world, campaigning and taking action for radical social change that is based on freedom, co-operation, justice and solidarity and against environmental degradation, neoliberal exploitation, racism, homophobia and patriarchy. New forms of media

and the internet have permitted these struggles to become global and the Indymedia concept has spread around the world. Francis Fukuyama's proclaimed 'end of history' thesis declaring the triumph of market capitalism after the fall of the communist bloc now seems rather premature.

The Trapese Collective formed in the run up to the mobilisation against the 2005 Group of 8 summit, as part of the Dissent! network. We undertook popular education workshops to engage with a wide range of people about the problems highlighted by the G8, and more importantly the workable alternatives which we felt were hidden from view. We had been involved in self-managed social centres, intentional communities aiming for sustainability, solidarity with groups like the Zapatistas, direct action against roads, the anti-war movement, climate change campaigning, Social Forums, independent media projects and community gardens. The aim of our work is to engage people in a debate where we all question our assumptions and look at how we can organise and respond. We see this book as part of the laying down of collective achievements, histories and inspirations of autonomous, horizontal politics, and a reflection of how to move forward.

what's in the book?

The eighteen chapters that follow weave together analysis, personal stories and examples of various everyday movements for change. The idea is not to dictate how things should be done but provide examples of places, ideas, ways of organising and inventions for you to do it yourself. This is not a comprehensive guide. Issues such as transport, alternative economies and housing, for example, could have been covered but due to space constraints are not. Neither was there room to do justice to the complex ways that class, race, gender, class, spirituality, religion or sexuality interact with what we are saying. Although as individuals we have been influenced from many places and peoples, this book is unashamedly focused on what we have found in parts of the world where we have lived. To analyse the global South, especially Africa and Asia, is a mammoth task and was outside our capabilities and experiences. What we have done instead is to focus on where we are best connected and knowledgeable, and leave it to others to do similar kinds of work elsewhere. We wanted to show that there are inspirational examples on everyone's doorstep and it's not necessary to travel the world to find them.

For each theme of the book there are two distinct chapters: one which introduces the theme, its histories, ideas, problems and pitfalls, and a more practical 'how to' guide consisting of ways to turn some of these ideas into reality. These guides are

not the last word on the subject, but represent a commitment from people to tell it as they have lived it. Depending on your personal experiences, some things may seem obvious, others less so. We hope you try them collectively, use them to put your version of the future into practice, connect with other people who are doing similar things, or come up with adaptations or improvements. Sources for further reading and research are given at the end of each theme. It is impossible to measure how these ideas may penetrate and travel. For some people they will ignite a spark, others may dismiss them. In any case, the book is a call to action and reflection. It outlines interventions which grow more urgent day by day in face of the crises that loom ahead. A handbook isn't enough to take back control but it's a starting point to get involved with people, networks and movements of resistance, inspiring creativity and changing our world.

resources

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