

All Power to the Imagination: Remembering John Lennon

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In 1971, early one morning on a Steinway piano on his resplendent Berkshire estate, John Lennon reflected on the seismic uprising of a peaceful counterculture, of united students and workers, which could have scared a thousand kings by reviving the egalitarian ideals of the 1871 Paris commune.

Against this raw new zeitgeist, and against the backdrop of uprising in America, he sung, famously, to the times: “imagine all the people... living life in peace.” Of all the memorable, piquant and mordant comments he made, that one is the one which has most transcended time; everybody is touched by those words with their beauty time can not erase with the bludgeon of her years. They are words worthy of being spelled across the stars.

Moreover, as a form of acknowledgement of the critical influence of the radicals on the febrile atmosphere of protest worldwide, he hailed, in the song’s middle eighth, with an equally breathtaking lyricism: “you may say I’m a dreamer... but I’m not the only one,” paying heed to a fresh generation of activists who had proclaimed an era of permanent struggle, a species of rebellion in which intellectual renegades like John and themselves saw possibilities for the collapse of the system of domination today.

Within John’s diligently – yet spontaneously – developed philosophy of personal and social liberation – evident not only in his literature but his lyrics, letters and interviews – which came to become a highly regarded and influential source of guidance to the oppositional movements of the New Left, the goal of every serious writer and musician became to enlist their progressive arsenal to help establish a non-repressive society based on fundamentally different existential relations to the oppressive ones incarnate in contemporary society.

It was imagined that meditation on revolutionary art could help to manifest this utopia, and so Lennon invested serious time and attention in his development as a writer and musician who could bring his power to bear on peaceful revolution. According to Lennon’s view, nascent protest movements brought utopia closer to fruition because they mobilised against all manifestations of oppression perpetuated by the dominant institutions of civilisation, namely money and war and organised religion.

Lennon’s meditations on the backlash against imperialism, the craven society it beget, the vast misery it engineered, made in the zenith of the New Left’s activity, reveal his thoughts on liberation in their broader cultural and historical context. It was a time of transition, a seismic era: imperialism was increasingly assailed by protest and revolt organised diligently by those no longer invested in the rigged game of society. They worked together towards laying the foundations of a qualitatively different and unique society, one which transvaluated – transformed the values of – the corrupt civic order they lived in.

The 60's counterculture, and the tide of protest movements which succeeded it, were passionately abloom with a protest against imperialism, a movement to: transcend its conditions of alienation which cuts to the roots of its existence, which argued vehemently against its henchmen in the third world, and despised, mocked its culture, its morality of nihilism and wastefulness.

By this point it had become clear to Lennon that the growth and success of the imperial state was an expression of a project at the centre of which is the experience, transformation and organisation of life and people as the mere subjects of domination. Civilisation entrenched tyranny, subjugation, exploitation and alienation of the masses and nature. But Lennon, like the counterculture, was incandescent for bubbling with optimism about change. There was a world to win.

The culmination of Lennon's later lyrics, letters, loves, and learning experiences represented an attempt to realise the revolutionary potential of radical philosophical experimentation that marked Lennon as truly a man of the 60's counterculture. Whilst the historical trend had been towards the continuation of war and aggression as a policy of the dominant powers on the world stage, Lennon nevertheless remained committed to the project of global peace and peaceful enlightenment, in which he saw the potential to manifest a rational and moral utopia banished of social ills and wants such as war, pollution and greed.

He believed in this project because the conquest of the war machine over the natural instincts of love and peace - symbolised most negatively by the atomic bomb - and the exponential development of the productive forces of the war machine in the advanced industrial states signified to him that the utopian designation for revolutionary ideas had ceased to be an operative truth, because the means really existed to rationally and creatively plan society in such a way as to create solidarity, abundance, happiness, and peace.

If that social vision was to be dismissed as utopian, then realism can be called into disrepute. That is to say ideology had concealed the reality of domination and alienation inherent in imperialism. Lennon's message implicitly implored people to think about the terrifying truth of the world we currently live in by imagining one that was better.

The life, lyrics, loves and literature of Lennon place him as the crux of an opposition of youth and intellectuals and persecuted minorities against a corrupt authoritarian state which engaged in military warfare against its own citizens, insofar as it coldly perceived how powerfully they could subvert the continuum of repression perpetuated by the hegemonic and hawkish military-industrial complex.

What made Lennon and his disciples so dangerous to the status quo was the way they acted beyond the continuum of repression, conscientious about liberating themselves from its demanding repressive imperatives, those of a society which they could see was constrained by a carefully managed ideological conformism. Lennon's anger at social injustice and organised repression developed through the sixties and seventies to focus on the ways in which war-makers and the political classes were tightening control of their societies not only through the rule of the iron fist, but also through new technologies like telly, the new religion, which integrated the working classes into regulated modes of thought and behaviour.

Moreover, the doom cloud of the Cold War loomed large on Lennon's mind, in his mind the

battle being, like in the mind of the militants, as two systems equal in degrees of totalitarianism, transcending the Cold War demonology which cast communism as the oppressor against the liberal democratic state. Lennon saw that, save for the nascent counterculture movement, liberal democracies were static societies in which there was a dearth of opposition to the status quo, in which people were integrated in to regulated systems of thought and behaviour.

Imagine aimed to surprise and stimulate, and it helped give inspiration and joy to the parties and groupings that constituted the international solidarity movement of the sixties, making stone hearts bleed and people united. In the spirit of a genuinely radical critique of society Lennon bequeathed a vision rare in its passion, a seminal song of the liberation era which distinguished the new vision and ideas of the anti authoritarian left. It pays well to flash our eyes on Lennon's lyrics, for their insight in to the terrifying truth of a culture that alienates the essence of our humanity.

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