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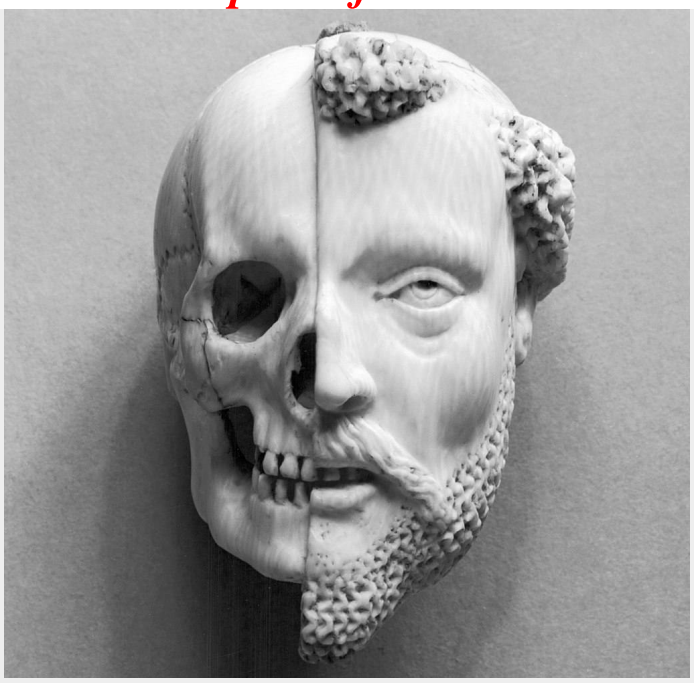
'The Merry Month of May:' a Summons to Grasp the Spirit of the Time



'Pendant with a Monk and Death,' 1575-1675. ivory. Walters Art Museum. Acquired by Henry Walters. – Public Domain

Death by plague is personified in this quote: "Men, women, & children dropt downe before him: houses were rifled, streetes ransack, beautifull maidens throwne on their beds and ravisht by sickness: rich mens cofers broken open, and shared amongst prodigall heirs and unthrifty servants: poore men used poorely, but not pittifully; he did much hurt, yet some say he did very much good."

So wrote Thomas Dekker in The Wonderfull Yeare (1603) when Queen Elizabeth died and 35,000 others in London owing to the bubonic plague. Its vector was a pathogen carried by a flea living on a rat carried on a ship coming from elsewhere. It was another globalizing year for merchant capitalism. The East India Company ship returned with a million pounds of pepper, Shakespeare's Othello, the Moor of Venice opened on stage, and the Ottoman sultan, Mohammed III, perished from the plague. Dekker wrote of London low-life and knew something about it having spent seven years in debtor's prison. He made a penny as a gonzo journalist, The Wonderfull Yeare being the first of his 'plague pamphlets.'

Four years earlier his play The Shoemaker's Holiday, or the Gentle Craft was performed by the Admiral's Men. It contains the ballad which gives us,

O the month of May, the merry month of May,
So frolic, so gay, and so green, so green, so green!

In 1603 Dekker described "perfuming all the ways … with the sweete Odour that breathed from flowers, herbs, and trees, which now began to peepe out of prison…." "Streets were full of people, people full of joy," but not for long. Soon the world was to run on the wheels of the pest cart. Dekker warned his readers of the mass graves that awaited them in manure piles: "Tomorrow thou must be tumbled into a Mucke-pit and suffer thy body to be bruised and prest with three score dead men…." Dekker contemplated the good effects of death, noting that Death did "very much good."

It is this combination of pandemic and May that is our theme. It is not only sweet odors that peep out of spring now, prisoners are released to control further contagion. Bodies are not thrown into "muck pits," but mass graves are dug on an island off the Bronx. And here we are in May with little that's frolicsome.

Folks with a long memory remember May Day as the workers' holiday, an international day of solidarity. In 1886 on May first workers struck for the eight hour day. After a worker was shot, a protest meeting was held at Haymarket Square and several more were shot. The next year on 11 November state terror in the ghastly form of hanging by the neck befell on some of the eight accused of conspiracy. Workers throughout the world responded to this horror by taking up the call: eight hours work, eight hours rest, eight hours for what you will.

The memory of the Haymarket martyrs was preserved in Mexico: "los martiros" — Albert Parsons, August Spies, Sam Fielden, Oscar Neebe, Michael Schwab, Adolph

Fischer, George Engel, and Louis Lingg — knew that they fought a life and death struggle. “There will come a time,” Spies had said, “when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today.”

And then folks with elephant memory (they can go way back) will tell of another powerful, silenced tale. In 1627 the first May pole was erected in North America, or Turtle Island, eighty feet high and decorated with garlands, wrapped in ribbons, and capped with the antlers of a buck. A rainbow of people, some from England, like Thomas Morton, some indigenous, some perhaps African, stirred by the sound of drums “brewed a barrel of excellent beare.” They danced, drank, and frolicked. So gay (a ganymede was among them), and so green, so green, so green. The armed Puritans of Boston put an end to it. Miles Standish burned the settlement, confiscated the goods of Morton, put him in chains, and threw him out.

The die was cast. Woe unto America!

If one story was for a green, multi-ethnic America and another story was for a borderless land of shorter hours, a red story, what is our story to be? It transcends both the Red and the Green. Trees afire: the planet burning: people sick or worried sick. What future may we expect? Climate refugees. Children in concentration camps. Money for prisons not for schools. Workers suffering everywhere.

The preamble to the I.W.W. (Wobblies) constitution (1905) said, “There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people, and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life.” There’s the Red. The Red is widely evident in Turtle Island -– hunger strikes in prison, wildcat strikes at Perdue, sick-outs at construction sites, rent strikes in Oakland and Chicago, production shut-downs at Fiat-Chrysler, slow-downs, and zillions of examples of mutual aid, like bus drivers providing free fares.

The Wobblies’ preamble continues with the Green in the conclusion of their next statement. “Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the Earth.”

Perhaps the ‘black’ may reconcile the ‘red’ and the ‘green.’ Claude McKay thought so. In a year of killer influenza (1919), he wrote the freedom sonnet that begins:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot.

Shortly thereafter he wrote the essay “How Black Sees Green and Red,” giving us the clue to our dilemma: the Irish freedom struggle would initiate the whole colonial struggle from India to Kenya to Jamaica against empire.

In order to prevent further infection by the coronavirus our gatherings this year are locked–down before they begin – no demonstrations, no marches, no picnics. Perhaps no people’s assemblies, possibly no revolutionary actions, few occupations if any.

Revolution must mean rest. We obtained a small taste of that rest. A corner of the veil was partly lifted to expose what life could be like. The air unpolluted, the fish returned to the rivers, bird song replacing rush-hour, dolphins in the canals. We could stay up late and sleep in the morning and philosophize in the afternoon. No alarm clock. The veil lifted to reveal a moment, almost just a blink, of real social tranquility. The moment passed. All is contradiction. We are advised to wash our hands. At the same time the neoliberals turn off the taps. We are advised to say in doors, and the neoliberals deny us a roof over our heads. Stand six feet apart, we are told, and we are jammed into prison.

The earth needs a fallow year to replenish itself. This was the ancient jubilee call.

The Wobblies said, “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common.” Strictly speaking, that’s true, because historically speaking the employing class took away the commons. That is why May Day is a workers’ holiday; May Day is Día del Trabajo in Cuba. The commons and the class system are totally incompatible. The commons emerges from memory. It comes from history into today, from dreams into consciousness, from never-never land into this land — our land — from utopia into urgency. The commons is our inspiration for a new world.

First, the commons means the development of local grass-roots alternative infrastructures. Every step and level of social reproduction — birth, education, nurturance, food, health, safety, housing, knowledge –- must be commoned. Communal reproduction is the center of our struggle. Behold, the “essential” worker. Second, the commons enables us to resist the two faces of capital, the state and the market, from a position of strength. The globalization of the virus permits us to see the globalization of our forces.

We conduct ourselves with mutual aid. From this emerges the self-activity of popular sovereignty. Has ‘We the People’ become us? Are we moving from the pompous hypocrisies of politicians to something unpretentious, helpful. Bold.

Yet quickly it was turned against us as the “health crisis” became an “economic crisis.” Underlying it is the class system of domination and exploitation. It has passed its historic usefulness. Neither the state nor the market is adequate to the circumstances. Indeed, they have circumscribed the commons, with the violence of terror and the violence of money.

Spirit was wherever there was breath, as there is with all our fellow creatures. As Jim Perkinson reminds us, the idea of “spirit” is inseparable from the idea of “air,” “breath,” “wind”; what goes in and out of every living thing on the planet percolates up through ocean waters and froths in stream-beds and aerates river curves. A soft wind blows as the angel of William Morris passes by. All that is wanted, said Morris, is “Intelligence enough to conceive, courage enough to will, power enough to compel.”

Besides that lightness of spirit, there is ferocity. We sigh. We pray. We keen. We chant and sing. We howl. We roar. Whatever we say it is with our breath. Yet the air is uncertain, aerosolized, polluted, harmful with particulates, viral pathogens infect our life-giving oxygen and nitrogen.

The merry month of May. This is the time of year, at least in the temperate zones, when the sap begins to run, when the blood is up. The fertility of this season on earth when the wintry seed buds, then blooms, anticipating leafing, so easily expanded into all our life. These, so to speak, are the Passover and Easter of May Day: the time to escape Pharaoh’s plagues or to defy the Roman Empire with the spirit of justice and love, both meek and bold. No wonder the grand old Wobbly historian and fighter Fred Thompson spent the last decade of his long life fretting about why anyone would imagine two holidays, Earth Day and May Day. Why not, he asked, one celebration of life and struggle?

What is May Day when we cannot assemble with our fellow workers, our comrades, our friends and neighbors, what can we do? It is a result of this situation, strangely disembodied, where we cannot march together, where we cannot even have a picnic together; that reveals the spirit of May. A major form of the incarnation of our collective is denied. “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” Our spirit, perforce, must prevail. We do not refer to the Holy Ghost or to the “spectre haunting Europe,” though who knows?

Something is afoot. Listen to Hegel: “Spirit often seems to have forgotten and lost itself, but inwardly opposed to itself, it is inwardly working ever forward (as when Hamlet says of the ghost of his father, “Well said, old mole! canst work i’ the ground so fast?”) until

grown strong in itself it bursts asunder the crust of earth which divided it from the sun, its Notion, so that the earth crumbles away."

"It is my desire that this history of Philosophy should contain for you a summons to grasp the spirit of the time, which is present in us by nature, and — each in his own place — consciously to bring it from its natural condition, i.e. from its lifeless seclusion, into the light of day." Philosophy of History (1817)

Man flew as high as he could until May Day 1960 when the USSR shot down a CIA surveillance plane, a U2, and captured its pilot, Gary Powers, son of a Kentucky coal miner. The urge to go high belongs with the urge to dominate and to surveil. We counter sur-veillance with sous-veillance, that is, we look from below instead of from above with the perspective of the mole, not of the satellite. On another May Day, 1999, the frozen corpse of George Malory was discovered just shy of the summit of Mt. Everest. His 1927 venture into the thin air at the roof of the world killed him, a casualty, like that of Gary Power's U2 flight, of the fallacy of elevation.

Now and always the production of misery refuses pauses. If capital is, as Marx famously observed, dead labor it can hardly balk at the corpses in generates. The influenza epidemic of 1918/1919 was the very worst. Thought at the time to have originated at a Kansas military base, the pandemic surely spread as a result of war. Millions perished in America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, far more than perished in the world war that concluded at the same time. We should not separate these events. Nor separate them from the workers' revolutions in Russia, in Hungary, in Germany. Nor did they have nothing to do with the steel strike in Pittsburgh, or the general strike in Portland, or the lynchings, or the Palmer raids, this country's first Red Scare.

As the horrific second wave of the 1918 flu exacted its peak toll in fall of 1918, the US sent 5,000 troops in the Polar Bear Expedition to fight as an invading force against the Russian Revolution. Scores died of disease, 90 percent of those victims contracting influenza. At that same moment the US government's half-hearted public health policies also contrasted with its increasingly full-throated determination to repress dissent, most famously by throwing the socialist leader Eugene Debs into prison for opposition to the carnage and purpose of the Great War.

In our moment of danger, the (dis)assembly lines in meat production not only enforce deadly closeness of one worker to another but have sped up to such a pace that to cover a

cough means missing a piece of meat and getting disciplined by a boss. One center of the pandemic within the pandemic that brings death and disease to meatpacking workers is Milan, Missouri. That little city is the differently pronounced — long i –- namesake of Milan, Italy, the center of industrial production so ravaged by Covid-19. In the Smithfield pork plant in Missouri's Milan, workers report facing a choice between losing their health or losing their jobs as they decide whether to cover their mouths when coughing and therefore miss processing what's left of an animal as it whizzes past.

But workers have, can, and must slow down the death-dealing. The remarkable achievement, at least for a time, of an eight-hour workday, so deeply connected to the history of May 1, suggests as much. So too do today's mounting and many-sided protests of auto-workers, healthcare workers, delivery drivers, warehouse workers, taxi drivers, grocery workers, transit drivers, flight attendants and more, all of whom demand to be living humans, not dead heroes, after the waning of the virus.

Indeed, even the most rehearsed lesson of pandemic history concerning the 1918 flu shows how lifesaving can come from below. In that parable we learn that on September 28, 1918, Philadelphia hosted a giant patriotic Liberty Loan parade; St. Louis meanwhile eschewed such gatherings and instead quickly implemented what would later be called social distancing. The two cities both soon suffered horrific epidemics of death, but the rate of Philadelphia's doubled that of St. Louis, and at its peak was eight-fold greater. Public health, especially the quick closing of schools, sporting venues, and theatres in St. Louis, mattered.

But it was also St. Louis's good fortune not to have a massive pro-war parade. Here the history-making of radicals, often immigrants, made a difference. In April 1917 the Socialist Party met in St. Louis to affirm its "unalterable opposition" to US entry into the war as a "crime against the people." Opposition to war, capital, and empire matured. Liberty loans were often a tough sell in Missouri, where strikes, slacking, and resistance to conscription made the state a healthier place, as Christopher Gibbs's excellent research has shown.

St. Louis's mostly young radicals of the recent past and present, who built a mass movement against racist killings by police after the 2014 murder of Mike Brown, remind us that to gain freedom requires that we "shut shit down." As the earth heals a little in a

terrible shutdown, we are called to reflect on the May Day spirit of putting a stop to things. We surely must shut it down or it will us.

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