ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

What needs to change?

COLLECTIVE ENCOUNTERS

An extract from *From the Personal to the Political: Theatre for Social Change in the 21st Century with particular referenced to the work of Collective Encounters: a review of relevant literature*

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Collective Encounters' Research Lab, Liverpool 2012

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In this paper Sarah draws on the writing of a range of leftist thinkers and radical activists to help her set out a political context

for change and articulate the political context within which Collective Encounters situates itself

Inherent in the idea of researching a theatre for change is the assumption that change is necessary or at least desirable. But change *from* what *to* what? To understand the rationale behind the presupposition of a need for change it will be helpful to describe the local context within which Collective Encounters operates, and to introduce the ideological framework that guides its work. It will be useful to explore how recent and current changes are impacting on the communities with which Collective Encounters engages and to position this local experience within a broader national and global context.

It is equally important to interrogate the *idea* of change: to understand how theatre might function as an agent of change it is necessary to understand the process of change. To this end the review will explore leftist thinking around what change means in practice. Who sets the change agenda? What are the levers of change? What might a framework for change look like? What are the ethics of change? Finally, it is important to interrogate the fundamental assumption that theatre can contribute to change.

The Social Context for Change: Poverty, Inequality and the Spiral of Deprivation

Collective Encounters' Base

Collective Encounters is based in north Liverpool, an area of extreme disadvantage. Its office is in the fourth most deprived ward in England and its participatory programme is delivered in areas that fall in the most deprived one percent nationally (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011). 73% of children in parts of north Liverpool are living in poverty. Educational attainment is only half as good as the national average, and illiteracy rates are up to 36%. Levels of ill health are high and life expectancy is low: men are likely to die eight years younger than the English average (Liverpool City Council, 2011a & 2011c). The area has experienced severe decline over the past forty years due to the decimation of its industrial base, leading to widespread unemployment and the reduction of its population by a half as people relocated to find new jobs. This has resulted in empty and derelict housing stock, fragmented communities and widespread dissatisfaction. In the 2001 and 2005 general elections one north Liverpool ward had the lowest voter turn out in the UK; in the 2010 election it had the third lowest turn out with only half the electorate

voting. While several regeneration programmes have been implemented they have had limited success and, on the whole, north Liverpool's experience of change has been very negative.

Collective Encounters also works with marginalised communities beyond north Liverpool, in particular with people with experience of homelessness, disadvantaged young people, people with dementia, and carers. 2011-12 saw the biggest increase in homelessness in the UK for nine years with a 44% rise in households homeless due to repossession (Butler, 2012 a). Homeless charities are concerned that in the current economic climate, with stringent cuts and changes in housing benefits, this figure will continue to escalate (see for instance Crisis, 2012). Children's charities are similarly concerned about government policy, in particular with regard to the review of child poverty measures, which seem likely to revise child poverty as a fundamental measure of low income (Wintour, 2012). Today, one-third of children in the UK are living in poverty, this is significantly less than the north Liverpool average, but is still extremely high. 800,000 people in the UK are living with dementia and the NHS has identified this as a priority for action, recognising that care workers and other health professionals are inadequately trained to provide effective support (Lakey et al., 2012). Dementia charities raise concerns about the quality and provision of care, and campaign against the inequality that results from the charging-for-care system (see for instance Alzheimer's Society, 2012). People with dementia are often isolated and excluded: the Department of Health (2009, p. 58) found that beyond their immediate care requirements, a person with dementia in a care home spends on average only two minutes per day interacting with others. In addition, Carers themselves often suffer poverty. Care workers are some of the UK's lowest paid staff with thousands earning less than minimum wage (BBC, 2011); and family carers, who support two thirds of people living with dementia, are often forced to give up their own employment with many failing to qualify for carers benefits (Carers UK, 2012).

The common features of Collective Encounters' participant base then, is experience of poverty, disadvantage, disenfranchisment and marginalisation. Charities across the third sector are concerned that the current welfare reforms will not only increase inequality and the negative impacts of poverty, but will exacerbate the demonisation of the poor and the negative stereotyping of those suffering disadvantage (Butler, 2012 b). Anticipated changes are perceived as likely to worsen the situation for the poor and heighten inequality (see for instance My Fair London, 2012).

Another common feature of the communities Collective Encounters engages with is a lack of consistent arts provision. In a city well known for its cultural output and thriving arts scene these gaps highlight the barriers commonly experienced by marginalised groups to engaging with arts activity.

An Ideology of Change

While Collective Encounters begins each new project by exploring with participants and the wider community what changes are needed and desired within their specific context, there is a fundamental change agenda underpinning all of its work. This is a desire for change from poverty to sufficiency, from inequality to parity. The company takes the position that current levels of inequality and deprivation are morally and ethically wrong and believes that inherent in extreme inequality is an inevitable imbalance of power with many communities disempowered, marginalised and effectively voiceless.

The underlying assumption of Collective Encounters' approach to TfSC, as illustrated in its *Manifesto*, is that theatre has the potential to change the lives, life experiences and life chances of the people who engage with it, and that this can be achieved through personal transformations; by enabling participants to find a voice and a stake in society; by changing others' perceptions; and by changing policies and provision to better suit people's needs. To direct the focus of the work, articulate this understanding of change and help measure impact, the company developed a set of *Social Change Indicators*, which were framed around Personal, Civic and Political Changes (Thornton, 2009).

An evaluation of Collective Encounters' impact over its first five years found that its work was perceived by participants, audiences and stakeholders as having been very successful in terms of Personal changes, and to some degree had been successful with regard to small Civic changes, but had been much less effective in terms of wider Political change (Crook, 2009). This led the company to explore the relationship between the Personal and the Political and to look at how its work might have a more direct political impact. As part of that process it became increasingly clear that Collective Encounters' attitude to change and *Social Change Indicators* should be more thoroughly interrogated. It needed to

reconsider the very idea of change, the wider social and political context within which it operates, and the experience of poverty and inequality beyond its immediate setting.

From the Local to the Global

Collective Encounters' participants are not unique. In the UK at present poverty amongst working adults is at its worst since comparable records began: 65% of households have incomes below the national average and more than 13.5 million people are officially living in poverty (Aldridge et al., 2011). The gap between rich and poor along with income inequality is the worst it has ever been (Hills et al., 2010, p. 2). This pattern is repeated internationally: globally 22,000 children die every day as a direct result of poverty, and global inequality is worsening. According to Credit Suisse 0.5 per cent of global adults hold more than one third of the world's wealth, while the poorest forty per cent of the world's population hold only five per cent of the wealth (Keating et al., 2011). The communities with which Collective Encounters engages then, are part of the global majority experiencing the negative effects of extreme inequality; part of what The Occupy Movement calls 'The 99%' (Occupy, 2012).

The Political Context for Change

Neoliberal Economic Globalisation[1] and the Crisis of Democracy

While governments blame the recent economic crisis, a benefit culture, an inflated public sector and reduced growth, left wing political philosophers argue instead that inequality and resultant ills are structural, systemic flaws, necessary to and inseparable from capitalism (see for instance Zizek, 2009). That they are an inevitable part of the neoliberal market-based democracies adopted as governing systems throughout the Global North. Neoliberal Economic Globalisation (NEG) is a system of liberal imperialism, based upon the principles of the inviolable rights of property and the virtue of the market: rather than the market serving society's needs it "becomes the master of society and all within it" (Gills, 2002,

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[1] See Glossary

p. 5). Whether viewed through the lens of US imperialism (McNally, 2002), the union of Europe (Ginsborg, 2008), or the idea of Empire (Hardt and Negri, 2005), leftist political theorists agree that NEG promotes an individualistic agenda that tends towards the homogenisation of state policies to protect the interests of capital and the expansion of capital accumulation on a world scale. The necessary result, it is argued, is gross inequality. While these governing systems are called liberal democracies, the quality of democracy is contested (see for instance Mouffe, 2009). Imperialism is evident both in the imbalance of power within countries and in the attempts of the Global North to spread its version of democracy to the rest of the world.

These systems of representative democracy are deeply problematic. Low voter turn-out in north Liverpool is echoed nationally and internationally: voter turn-out in the UK's last local elections was only 38 per cent, and Hansard (2011) has found that the country's faith in Westminster is at an all time low. The declining engagement with traditional democracy is repeated throughout Europe and much of the rest of the Global North (Ginsborg, 2008).   Politics has become professionalised and left to a ruling elite. While current orthodoxy blames those who don't vote as disengaged and apathetic, leftist thinkers look to the system and its impact over the last two generations to understand the roots of this disengagement. They argue that it is the result of a shift in our positioning from citizen to consumer; to the creation of 'comfort rich', 'time poor' individuals, focussed on self and family rather than community; and to a "numbing of mind and heart" (Macy, 1998, p. 24) through increased consumption. Hardt and Negri (2005, p.53) reference the Situationists'[2] position that, "power in capitalist societies is becoming totalitarian through the production of docile subjects".

The inequities in our traditional model of democracy are thrown into even greater relief by the global power and economic position of corporations: in 2009, 44 of the 100 largest economies in the world were transnational corporations, rather than countries (Global Trends, 2012). As Ginsborg (2008, p. 41) says, these are "enormously powerful economic oligarchs... juggernauts in economic performance but dinosaurs in terms of democracy... great unaccountable powers". It is the ruling elites at the helm of these few corporations who control the power.

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[2] See Glossary

Leftist thinkers argue that one of the greatest triumphs of NEG is that it has become an invisible system: that "the status quo has been naturalized and made into 'the way things really are'" (Mouffe, 2009, p. 5). While the system is responsible for extreme levels of poverty and rising inequality, if we cannot see the system we cannot change it. It is argued that to begin a process of change we must first challenge NEG as a contested concept and not a received theory. Given theatre's etomological root theatron, or seeing place, and the history of political theatres seeking to make strange the status quo, this is a valuable starting point for considering the potential of TfSC in the 21st Century.

Routes of Resistance

Until late in the twentieth century there were two traditional schools of thought as to how to bring about significant social and political change: change the system from within or total transformation through revolution. Since the rise of NEG and the shift to centre of both left and right, radical thinkers believe that opposition has been eroded within mainstream politics (see for instance Gills, 2002). The professionalisation of politics, the crisis of traditional democracy and the naturalisation of the status quo mean that hope of radical change from within the system has all but vanished. It may be possible to tinker with individual policies or impact on local provision in small ways, but leftist thinkers agree that radical root and branch reform will not be found through "reformist gradualism" (Zizek, 2009, p. 78). At the same time it is widely recognised that "traditional models of political activism, class struggle and revolutionary organisation have today become outdated and useless" (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 68). In 2012, Marxist dreams of revolution are long gone, and the Political Theatre that was connected with them seems archaic.

But this disengagement from traditional politics and lost revolutionary dreams does not necessarily imply apathy or loss of hope for change. As faith in these traditional routes has dwindled, direct and indirect action, single-issue campaigning, DiY protests and networks of opposition have flourished. New Social Movements have emerged across the globe offering a radical alternative to the mainstream, both in terms of message and organisation (see for instance McKay, 1998). Commentators argue that we are not "post-ideological" or "post-political" (Fox and Starn, 1997, p. 2) but simply "post-political party" (Driver et al., 2012, p. 159). We are in a new era of opposition, where the Multitude[3] replaces the masses (Hardt and

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[3] See Glossary

Negri, 2005, p. xiv) and the politics of resistance is being reconstructed (Gills, 2002). 2011 was a year of unprecedented local, national and global protest: the Arab Spring toppled governments, the UK experienced its most serious civil unrest in generations, and the Occupy Movement saw 695 camps established in 82 countries across the world. The will for change is clearly present; radical thinkers recognise the potential of a "disunified multitude" of opposition (Driver et al., 2012, p. 165); a "movement of movements" (Bogad, 2010, p. 537) through which global circuits of cooperation and collaboration can oppose NEG (see for instance Holloway, 2010). It will be important then, to consider how TfSC might be part of this Multitude.

Imagining Alternatives

While the specific demands of individual campaigning groups and the positions of radical thinkers are inevitably diverse, there are discernable commonalities in thinking about what needs to happen or the things that must be in place before meaningful change can occur. These will be described here as prerequisites for change and are important for informing thinking about a theatre for change. The first prerequisite was highlighted earlier: that the status quo must be challenged and de-familiarised. The second is that we need to talk and to reconsider the ways we approach basic political concepts, to reflect and imagine rather than be rushed into kneejerk solutions (Zizek, 2009). It is argued that in our era of sound bites and instant gratification, the call for instant alternatives is a central tool of oppression and a method of maintaining the status quo (McNally, 2006). A third prerequisite is the recognition of the need to engage people as citizens and not consumers: to break the separation between people and politics and to find a new democracy, or new power relations (Mouffe, 2009). A fourth is that we need to imagine new stories and create new narratives for living. We are, it is argued, in between stories, in a period of interregnum: "what was, no longer is, what will be has not yet arrived" (Schechner, 2010, p. 314). We need to construct alternative futures and dissenting narratives (Fox and Starn, 1997).

Many frameworks incorporating these ideas are suggested by radical thinkers. While they are contested and imperfect they offer interesting ways of thinking about processes of change. Once such framework is provided by Joanna Macy, a leading Deep Ecologist[4], in which she sets out her vision for a journey of socio-political change from NEG to a more equitable and sustainable future.

Macy's framework provides a clarity that draws together many of the core values and ideas of diverse social justice movements, and incorporates the four prerequisites outlined above. It offers a useful lens through which to view theatre's potential contribution to change, and provides a provocative way of thinking about TfSC that connects it more directly and tangibly into the broader movement for change. It may also provide a structured way of thinking about TfSC that enables a discussion of efficacy that is not dependent on problematic scientific measures and instrumentalism. The framework will be set out here, and then used in Part Four of this review to structure thinking about Collective Encounters' practice.

Macy articulates three dimensions in her framework: *Analysis of Structural Causes and Creation of Alternatives*; *Holding Actions;* and *Shift in Consciousness* (Macy, 1998). By *Analysis of Structural Causes and Creation of Alternatives* Macy refers to the idea that before we can change a system we need to understand it: to demystify the workings of NEG and expose the tacit understandings that keep it functioning. This connects directly with the first precondition for change discussed above, that the status quo must be challenged. This dimension of the change process also incorporates the second and third preconditions, in its idea that once we understand the system we can begin to imagine and create new models of organising and new ways of living. By *Holding Actions* Macy incorporates both direct and indirect action that slows down the negative impact of NEG and alleviates suffering in the short term. Direct action and other "forms of refusal" (Macy, 1998, p. 18) include actions that confront or disrupt socio-political processes; that get in the way of business-as-usual. Indirect actions include political, legal, advocacy or other work that counteracts inequality, improves quality of life for the marginalised and slows down environmental damage. This may, for instance, include attempts to change policy and provision. While this might seem allied to the reformist gradualism discussed above, Macy explains that:

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[4] See Glossary

Work of this kind buys time. It serves to save some lives, and some ecosystems, species, and cultures... for the sustainable society to come. It is, however, insufficient to bring that society about (Macy, 1998, p. 18).

So in her framework, there is value in attempting to improve things in the short term while working towards the bigger goal of fundamental socio-political change. Finally, Macy's *Shift in Perceptions of Reality* describes the idea that we need to find new ways of thinking about our world and our place within it; and begin to tell new stories: essentially the fourth precondition.

While Macy's framework is specifically applied to ecology and environmentalism, to what Deep Ecologists call The Great Turning[5], her three dimensions of change resonate across the social justice world, and are equally relevant to socio-political change in many contexts. They offer a valuable and structured way to think about how theatre might usefully contribute to change in the 21st century: does a piece of work help to *analyse the structural causes* of inequality and other social-political ills? In what ways does the work help to *create alternatives*? Does a particular project function as a *holding action* and if so how? Does a project aim to *shift perceptions of reality*? Macy's framework could potentially help Collective Encounters to conceive of its work and structure its programme in the direct service of change.

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Glossary

Deep Ecology	a contemporary ecological philosophy that argues the intrinsic value of the natural world beyond its instrumental utility to human needs. It is part of the multitude of social justice movements, challenging inequality and NEG through the lens of environmentalism. It is deeply concerned that the rampant consumerism and industrialisation of the Global North is leading pathologically towards the decimation of the ecosystems necessary to sustain life on earth.
Global North	a term commonly used to describe the countries considered highly developed socio-economically or industrially, comprising what might more otherwise be called First and Second World; the term Global North is preferred here as it assumes less superiority
Multitude	adopted by Hardt and Negri to describe their ideas of a new model of resistance to Neoliberal Economic Globalisation: at its most basic, the unified power held by the collection of small resistances happening across the globe
Neoliberal Economic Globalisation	one of a variety of terms to describe the contemporary system of capitalism employed in the Global North. Neoliberal Economic Globalisation (NEG) is borrowed from Gills (2002).
The Great Turning	Term used by Deep Ecologists to describe the journey from, what they term, the *Industrial Growth Society*, to a more sustainable future

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