STROLLING METAPHORS

By Rowan Cahill

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As I strolled this Summer’s day by the side of a local waterway, I looked beyond the overwhelming greenness of the vista and sought within the myriad shades of greens, the diversity of foliage and shapes, and the riot of colours, within and beneath the green hegemony - the reds, yellows, whites, reds, pinks, purples, orange and black, of berries and blooms, wilds and exotics, natives and weeds. And as I ‘saw’ the colours and diversities of shape and form, my mind turned to social protest and resistance movements. They can have names and labels and titles in history and in political discourse, like the anti-war movement of the 1960s of which I was part, Chartism of the nineteenth century, the French Resistance of World War II, developing anti-Trumpism.

The name/title/label, however, is really only a convenience, a way of simplifying complexities, just as my waterway panorama appears at first sight overwhelmingly green. Within that green there are manifold varieties of colours and forms, diversities of difference, unique in their own ways, with their own agendas if you will, sometimes mutually competing for space, even antagonistically, but overall constituting a green hegemony.

Alternatively, consider the hegemonic green as symbolic of the status quo, the repressive rule that is opposed, and the same applies. Beneath, and despite the system’s hegemony, there is a riot of challenge from below. Indeed, sometimes, a label obscures the actuality of what is taking place below, obscuring manifold resistances and dissidence, short changing traditions of protest and resistance, and in a way robbing the future.

By ideologically fixating one’s politics and ‘seeing’ on the hegemonic greenness of the vista, and on envisaging its defeat in one dramatic overthrow, one massive confrontation, one decisive clash, achieved by an all-embracing organisational structure of some kind, and often envisaged as occurring in some metropole, much is missed. And what is missed is the actuality of what is happening, the meek and the dramatic, the gentle and the confrontational, in many places, in many ways, by many people, often outside the metropole and away from the ‘eyes’ of the media and the celebratory ‘selfie’, at times private, at times very personal, perhaps no more than a one-to-one conversation or a bit of hacking or the trickle of a leak.

Resistance to be resistance is not necessarily a media event, though in these social- media times the notion of ‘dissent events’ is a useful dissident tool. But when, for instance, World War II Resistance activists variously destroyed strategic infrastructures in Nazi occupied Europe, they did not pose for film-shots to post on the non-existent Facebooks of their time, saying ‘look, here we are; this is what we did, this is where we are’, but went back to the anonymsities of their daily lives, until the next action. It was the act and its ramifications for the repressive rule that counted, not the “I did this, therefore I am” approach that seems to inform modernity. And often in resisting oppression, everything is not on the table and the resister/activist, as Marcuse once pointed out, has to choose from “what can be chosen”, and it becomes a matter then of “what is chosen”.

Failure to understand that resistance is a many flowered thing, with many shapes and forms, coupled with the ideological fixation/dream of a culminating big oppositional event that tumbles the
oppressive rule, is conducive to a form of despondency. Thus the feeling that until the occasion/realisation of the big event, nothing much is happening otherwise, and with this the perception that the despised rule prevails unchallenged. It is as though we take the David and Goliath story too literally. Sure, the story of one specially selected smooth stone and one slingshot and one person, a humble shepherd, bringing down Leviathan is a potent political story. But it is also mischievous. Mostly history shows that it is many resistances, by many people over time, many stones, many slingshots, that tumble Leviathan. And within this, it is not only the slingshot and its wielder that matter, but also the stones.

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