

THINK FUTURE, ACT PRESENT: DREAMS OF CREATIVE DEMOCRACIES



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LÁSZLÓ UPOR

Carry That Weight¹

A legendary Hungarian professor of dentistry begins his new course each year by warning the students: “Note that the tooth you are treating always ends in a human.” Whether the story is true or not is of minor importance because it teaches a simple but important lesson about parts and *the whole*, about organs and organisms.

You cannot “cure” a decayed democracy as an abstract idea (or fill the cavities), while ignoring the people involved. The human element. Body and mind; flesh, blood, nerves. Social tissue. And social movements are among the most effective treatments to repair and regenerate this particular tissue: the vital and highly sensitive organ of our body politic.

More than a protest, less than a revolution (although possibly a descendant of the first and the ancestor of the second), a movement may fight for a cause not for power. Progressive movements will, however,

¹ All of the subheads in this essay are borrowed from titles of Beatles songs, primarily from the 1969 album *Abbey Road*.

change attitudes and *transform the power structures* eventually. The accumulated effect of these movements is the construction of the anteroom to a more civil-friendly hall of democracy.

Social movements are not necessarily about *big numbers*, not about the mass: their strength derives from the collaboration of devoted people through collective action.

Golden Slumbers

Collective action shall wake up the individual and groups of individuals from their long sleep, whether in creepy corners of freezing shelters or in comfortable king-size beds in cozy homes. Collective action must rip the windows of Sleeping Beauty's castle open — let the fresh air in and remind people of the power of the (individual and collective) self as well as of their responsibilities.

Collective action is to a society as practicing is to musicians or dancers. Artists need talents and activists need ideas. But none can perform without the *everyday routine* of exhausting and demanding practice. And there is no sabbatical.

Collective action will not solve the ultimate problems of our race: it is not the famous sword of Alexander the Great that cuts through the Gordian knot of the global polycrisis, but it may help the Global Polis to *find ways* and gradually untie that knot through common effort.

Collective action may not save the world but it can train and prepare communities that eventually *will*, by stimulating the collective mind, evaporating cynicism, heating up frozen solidarity, and cooling down boiling hatred. Train and flex the muscles of the *true* body politic.

Maxwell's Silver Hammer

Collective action is not an end in itself but multidimensional research, a learning process, constant trial and error, an ever-unfinished business, an exercise in forms of communication and exchange. While working on a common task, individuals experience and realize how their contribution

changes the course of matters *in general* — and how collective collaborative action (different from the mob-like “togetherness”!) may become one strong pillar of a future society.

Collective action is a multifunctional liberation tool (DIY!) that serves, partly, to dismantle hierarchies and erase privileges, and ease the distrust, frustration, and embarrassment of the disempowered. More than a valuable *side effect*, this is an integral part of the long-term plan. At its best, collective action disarms the powerful and arms the powerless. Helps people trust each other (again) and believe in the meaning and possibility of action. By doing you prove *it is possible*. By doing you challenge the paralyzing fear and doubt (imposed by the arrogance of oppressive rulers and institutions). Collective action is best to nurture courage and boost morale. Fighting for a cause while negotiating, developing, and fine-tuning each other’s ideas, by actively participating in formulating the common will and executing the plan, creates and builds community.

Collective action: always a question mark or an exclamation mark — never a full stop. A movement is the opposite of stasis — and this is not just a play on words. Don’t let the system freeze. Keep it on alert.

Collective action may be a response to despair but can only be effective if it is inspired and conducted by the fearless and responsive imagination of the involved.

A movement may need leaders and definitely needs a *vision*, but it is never about one leader, or a one-person *mission* with many followers. The rise of individualism is the death of a movement — there are examples galore.

Something

The future of democracy lies in the present: it is guaranteed only by the presence of the present democracy (or: without its presence in the present, it’s a lost cause). You must not sacrifice, suspend, or postpone basic democratic values today in order to build tomorrow’s democracy (that is not to say that sacrifices may not be necessary). “Oh, I am all for democracy *in principle*, but need to implement undemocratic practices *temporarily* to be effective in building our democratic future.” There is no such thing

as the future of democracy if you don't believe in the possibility of potent democracy in the present. Time and space are inseparable, so why don't we paraphrase the slogan "think global, act local" as *think future, act present*.

Raise awareness, organize, act. Participate, invite, analyze, reorganize, refine, redirect. Resist, stand up, speak up. Act. Together. Embrace. Feed and get fed on each other's experience. Learn from the previous generation, teach the next generation.

Because

We proudly adapt. That is one of our signature characteristics. The species homo sapiens, with its sophisticated physical-chemical-biological-spiritual system, is highly adaptable to slowly changing conditions — even to those we shouldn't stand. Not only our bodies but our minds are dressed to accommodate. With obvious benefits. But.

The political climate crisis of our times is only comparable to the meteorological climate crisis. Growing gaps in living conditions, an unprecedented concentration of power and wealth, overwhelming propaganda (a state-of-the-art brainwashing machine), the victorious march of the non-fact, a growing realm of post truth. Plus, a wide range of (anti) social phobias, shamelessly used and abused by politicians and fueled and pumped-up by the media. Still, we adapt and adapt again, potentially to our own detriment, like those doomed mythical frogs in a pot of water slowly coming to a boil. Partly because we train ourselves to ignore the early signs and only react with a deadly delay, partly because we chose to respond individually. But collective action can help the individual and the smaller units of society recognize the dangerous rising temperature of our semi-comfortable society — and turn down the heat or knock over the pot of boiling water in time.

Come Together

A long history of political actions and movements prove how important the *joy of acting together* is to the success of a movement. Centuries — and especially the last decades — produced spectacular examples of festive

resistance. Activists and their collaborating partners, participants, and audiences (that is, potential future collaborators) need and deserve the feeling of community manifested in (and fueled by) shared laughter. And in the joy of creating. Creating something unexpected, something that holds. Images, sounds. Visual, acoustic, and spiritual signs. Slogans. Symbols.

Just how important those reminders are is evident in how major achievements by the superstars or everyday heroes of science, art, and activism are recognized and referred to. Big moments burn a lasting image into our minds and souls. Some are imprints, traces of a past or ongoing process, others are created in advance to identify something still shifting and shaping. Ordinary objects are reframed in new contexts, everyday actions find new meanings, common locations become places of pilgrimage, while others are *born symbols*.

The ubiquitous number Pi, Mona Lisa's mysterious smile, Picasso's shorts, and Glenn Gould's famously low piano chair; "the" zebra crossing on Abbey Road, Neil Armstrong's footprint on the Moon, Ruby Bridges' first steps into a desegregated school in New Orleans in 1960, Mahatma Gandhi's 240-mile Salt March in 1930, and giant puppet "refugee" Little Amal's travels (*The Walk*) across the seven seas in search of her mother and a new home; Maria Skłodowska's (aka Marie Curie's) second Nobel Prize, Greta Thunberg's "Fridays for Future," and Patti Smith's embarrassing but utterly human slip-up at the 2016 Nobel Ceremony; Stonewall Inn in New York, Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Maidan in Kyiv, and the Gezi Park in Istanbul; "I Have a Dream," Black Lives Matter, "Nothing About Us Without Us," and Woman, Life, Freedom. None of this needs further explanation.

We long for images, symbols (colors, visual patterns), music, and slogans on the threshold of the material and the spiritual, to relate to. To identify with. To translate, convey, and pinpoint high concepts. To encourage others to join the community and contribute, first just by sharing and actively using the symbols. Symbols have their own lives. They live much longer than the actions and movements that created them. They get revisited, recycled, reinterpreted, revived, adapted. Integrated. Refined. Developed.

Movements learn from each other, borrow methods, tools, ideas, ideals (sometimes even idealists) from their predecessors or sibling-movements. This is part of their strength; this is how the smallest-size and the shortest-living ones may be as influential as their stronger, bigger fellow-movements.

Here Comes the Sun

We don't know what a future democracy will look like. We don't know much about the future of democracy — therefore pre-planned scholarly research is not enough: we need to *actively experiment*. The way scientists do, the way artists do. The future of democracy may not lie in our strong belief in one *particular democracy* but in an endless experiment with *democracies*. (No, not the constant shifting and bending of principles the way autocrats do. And no, not appealing to the lowest common denominator the way populists do. Populism is the travesty of “power to the people”.) Social movements are institutions of advanced studies in (participatory) democracy.

A true laboratory for democracy is the realm of social movements (thus, social movements are laboratories for democracy): a learning society composed of various fields of study where the possibility of making errors is part of the deal. The power of being able to correct mistakes reinforces the belief in change and the flexibility of the complex system. Complex problems need complex solutions: not just a *social dentist* but a team of specialists and health workers to tend to *the whole body*.

Complexity needs imagination. In mathematics an imaginary (that is, “not real”) number (*i*) can, by filling a cavity, extend the *real number* system to the *complex number* system — which is very real indeed.

Collective action — group activism fueled by arts and sciences — does just that: fills the gap (or builds a bridge) between known realities. Paints a bright sky above the monochrome political ideologies and dictates of grim, numbing reality. Collective action must break the plaster sarcophagus of harmful dichotomies that — when solidified — fatally separates people from each other, thus paralyzing both the individual and the society. Collective action is Einstein sticking out his tongue.

With modern science — new geometry, quantum physics, psychoanalysis and more — we lost the firm ground of a previously coherent world view but gained a whole new universe to explore and inhabit. We learned how non-Euclidean geometries, with their surprising *parallel postulates*, reformed modern natural science and made (among other things) space travel possible. We haven't yet worked out, however, what *non-Euclidean society* will look like if we revise the *participatory democracy postulate*.

You don't need to be an artist or a researcher to be part of, or even initiate, a movement, but if you are an artist or/and a researcher, then you'd better take part in social movements.

Octopus's Garden

Art and science must descend from the ivory tower. The tower may — and sometimes must — provide a safe and quiet environment to test and nurture high ideas in soundproof laboratories. But neither science nor art should lock themselves up permanently in the secluded and padded top chambers of that tower.

You may work in your Sacred Ivory Tower and still reside in the village — while using the sky-high ladder, the light-speed escalator, a number of multicolor musical inflated slides, laser beams, or the rainbow parachute and a magic balloon of imagination to travel up and down between the two.

Descend from the ivory tower (a good place to observe the stars) to ground level and below, into the deep seas, where you can navigate with amazement the labyrinth of the laboratory of life. Find inspiration in analyzing the simple complexity of a protozoon, in observing the incredible octopus with its three hearts and all-over mysterious brain. The highly impossible axolotl and the unimaginable sea slug, with its capacity to decapitate itself to survive. See how it preserves its autonomy through autotomy when the worst comes to worst.

Study the coexistence, the symbioses, the rich connections within the all-global system. No organism is too simple, none is too complicated, if you look with curiosity and compassion. Raise a celebratory glass to the invitational, collaborative nature of creation.

And, when toasting, think of the multifaceted cooperation of human and non-human in creating the wine you have in your glass. First mineral, plant, soil, weed, insects, bees, sun, wind, and rain (possibly snow and ice); then fungi, steel tanks, oak barrels and amphorae, temperature, and humidity; later bottles and corks; eventually air again — your vision, your nose and taste buds to absorb the acids, sugars, a wide spectrum of smell and taste. Imperceptible is the visible change of the separate contributing elements — still, their accumulative contribution is immense and produces something unique.

Just the way the individual's creative spirit adds a distinct flavor to the collective action without losing the self. Again, and again, and again.

Here, there, and everywhere.

Across the universe.

