

Una detallada reflexión de mi barrio

Part 6

Some thoughts before the interviews begin.

After reading “A reflective look at my neighbourhood” with keen interest, I could see the importance and the relevance of the work. Carlos’s experiences, and the description of the place in which he seemed to recognise himself, have to be put in the context of a modern and very rapidly changing world where we find interacting, at different speeds, such elements of culture as politics, ideology, education, religion, philosophy and the many social behaviours found in today’s societies - all very well facilitated by a sophisticated network of man-made laws and economic interests designed to enhance the capabilities of today’s western culture. There is in place a protective shield, in the form of highly sophisticated technologies, available to governments and government agencies, to facilitate the activities, in the world of the poor, of powerful international organisations and the world of high finance. Like a shadow, operating in silence and in disguise, we find a fearsome military machine and a sometimes none too gentle Police Force, just in case something goes ‘wrong’ with those who work hard for a wage or a salary and dare to protest in the streets against injustice or unemployment. There is also the Vatican, of course, controlling the mind and soul of those believers who are unsure about such issues as abortion, divorce, contraception etc.

This calculated human effort, designed to make us all feel diminished, is projected into the wider world by a vast and controversial intercontinental network of communications and propaganda, controlled, in some cases, by a single individual, making us all feel we belong to the so called-voiceless mass.

How small and insignificant we are in this extraordinary man-made universe helped, as if that were not enough, by wars, civil wars, bureaucracy, scandals corruption, speculation and lies of the first order – all functioning ‘legally’ – to further underline our inadequacy to respond vigorously, as individuals, to many of these abnormalities of everyday life.

It is not, then, encouraging in this context to think that there is very little space left for individuals to delve subjectively into their own true nature, to develop an alternative universe which could allow them to express differently and freely their thinking, their feelings, their concerns and their views about many aspects of life. The individuals referred to are ordinary people - you and me, or perhaps businessmen and priests, unconcerned with our behaviour and that of others in relation to the whole of the universe where people are aware that they are at the mercy of the elements of nature and the whim of Mankind. I believe we are, for some unknown reason, busily constructing our own downfall as a race. Are we in a sort of trap? Is there a way out?

On another level, individuals are at the focus of many interests which go from the spiritual, where they are manipulated and used by a variety of religious concerns, to the ideological, where they are manipulated and used by political systems. Carlos seems to belong to the ideologically concerned who, in solemn silence, are trying to respond to what I will call in Spanish **las campanitas de conciencia**, ‘the little bells of conscience’. These bells of conscience are ringing fast and loud in the ears of many individuals, with the object of attracting their attention towards their own inner self so they can look critically at their natural environment, the sea, the mountains, the forests and lakes, so important to the spirit. The ringing is not only a desperate call for a certain order in mankind’s thinking or a call to attract our attention to the many beautiful things made by Man with his sophisticated techniques and reasoning, but also to call our attention to that dark side of humanity that is capable of self destruction. **Las campanitas de conscience** are, in a more pragmatic way, ringing in our ears to express concern for the many questions that spring to mind in everyday life.

Where are we going from here?

What follows is an array of questions which came about as a result of some thoughts after reading "The Barrio". In one way or another, the questions belong to, and reflect, themes touched on by that cultural universe epitomised in Carlos's barrio or, indeed, underlined in any barrio, experienced by any individual, in any country, or by any culture. These questions were not moulded by any particular rationale but by a desire to provoke a healthy reflection in the reader. They are at times naive, weird and provocative but our world is like this. Similarly, it does not mean that they are the right set of questions; they reflect, more than anything else, a state of mind.

I will begin by asking the reader some general questions.

Do we still want to persist in killing ourselves? Do we still want our world to be engaged in wars to prove that one political system or religious belief or philosophy is better than another?, Why is there an almost sexual tendency to expose ourselves to kill and to be killed?, Why do many Presidents, Prime Ministers and Generals who are family lovers, wear ties and have received a good education become mass murderers ? Is it worth dying by nuclear or bacteriological means? Do we really want to destroy our planet, already engulfed in man-made gases? Do we really want to prove that one religion is more valid than others? Do we want to establish that one group of people is more important than others?, Do we really want to think that one civilisation is better than others? What do we want to do with humanity and all living things? Can we live without dogmas? What are the intentions of all the wealthy nations in relations to the raw materials available in many very poor countries?

There are also the political questions, at the centre of our ways of life and culture.

Are we really free in the western world? What is the meaning of globalization for individuals? Does it mean the destruction of the environment? Is it about making people redundant? Is Capitalism the only proposition available to humanity to make us happy ? Are we happy? Is it worth dying for capitalism, imperialism, communism, socialism or for whatever other political system?, Can our masters accept that the whole of humanity is in urgent need of new ways of thinking to achieve real fulfilment in life and to look for ways to achieve a little understanding among ourselves and self respect for the weakest in societies?, What will happen if nothing is done?, What is the role of the IMF in world politics? Do our masters allow people to have ideals?, Is it still feasible and worthwhile to fight for ideals? What is the meaning of capitalism in the context of millions of very poor people? Does it represent some hope for them?

Are we really saying that Marxist ideas do not have a place in our present world? Where the evidence to suggest that Marxist philosophy is no longer a valid political system opposing capitalism? Is Marxism a philosophy? Are Marxism and Capitalism the imposition of a big idea based on a specific truth ? Where is capitalism taking us? Where would communism have taken us ? Is capitalism about producing beautiful consumer goods, making highly dangerous weaponry and a system based on propaganda ?, Is Marxism about red flags, bureaucracy, terror, the Berlin wall, the former Soviet social system, the former Soviet Bloc, Stalin, Lenin, the KGB, Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution, Chairman Mao, Che Guevara, or Ho Chi Minh ? or is it about the billions of very poor and destitute people in our world ?

Are we not meant to reflect on the following? :

The truth. What is it? If it exists at all, who benefits from the possible existence of an idea known as 'the truth'? Why, in the theory of knowledge, has 'the truth' become a nonsense in the way we understand it? Are people not being hurt and killed in the name of 'the truth?', What would happen if every single human being had the same amount of knowledge and belief ?

There are also the uncomfortable questions.

What would our world be if everyone had exactly the same amount of power as the United States? What would have been the result if every individual by the age of 50 had had the same amount of money as the owner of Microsoft ?

In what type of world would we have been living if every individual of the age of 50 had had the mind of Albert Einstein ?

Then there are the silly questions to consider.

Where are the new philosophers who can illuminate us about fulfilment in life?

Why do we drink too much? Is it worth working?, Is it fair not to do so ? Why are we so passive to important events in life? Why are we so energetic in thinking, talking, inventing, creating beautiful things - and then busy destroying them?

There are also the questions that surprise us all:

Why do we allow the ignorant to be our leaders? We all agree, without rhetoric, that our world is a very dangerous place to be in and yet we know that, for a tiny minority, it is a very happy one. Do we want to change this state of affairs? Who or what will change it? What will be the cost? Who will pay the cost ?, How high will the cost be? Will it be paid by our generation or future generations ? Can we not accept the fact that in every adult man we find a 'naughty' child?

Then, in a frank, plain, critical and constructive discussion we must direct our enquiries towards the nation which influences, more than any other in the world, our way of thinking and our way of life. It is the United States, the unchallenged superpower, the principal protagonist on the world stage at the centre of our modern culture and the protagonist at the centre of heated controversies.

Are the people of the world envious of their achievement? Is the American way of life the model to imitate? How does the United States benefit from an organisation such as the IMF? What are the effects of this in the world economy, especially the economies of the poorer countries? How does the United States benefit by 'helping' others? Do they 'help' other people? If yes, what is the cost to be paid by those receiving help from the United States? What are the real intentions of the United States of America, as the most powerful nation in the world, in relation to other powerful nations and in relation to the weakest and the poorest nations of the world? (*I am not sure if this is a good question, I hope that the next one is*)

Is this country ready and prepared for self destruction like many other advanced civilisations before it? We all seem to know the US agenda, and on this understanding we still support it. Why do we have to ? Is this agenda that the people of the United States want?

We all know what Hollywood is about and the symbolism it represents in American culture. Few know, however, that Hollywood is a metaphor representing the state of affair of our planet. (this is a very bad statement, but the following one is better)

We are ready to support, acclaim and applaud furiously the United States' triumphs in whatever field but why, at the same time, have it become our nature and habit to remain silent and weak in condemning many of that country's arrogant attitudes, costing many lives in the world at large? Are we not too complacent towards it? Vietnam, Central America, the Caribbean, South America, Iraq, Iran, Africa, and Afghanistan are few examples where the United States' military might, using the most sinister weaponry at its disposal, has committed horrendous crimes. (A fair statements followed by a more rhetorical one).

Is it not true to say that many atrocities involving millions of children as casualties, have been carried out in the name of 'Freedom'. What is Freedom? What is Freedom for a gaucho in Patagonia, an inhabitant of a shantytown and what is Freedom for a New Yorker running a big multinational company?

Next, our line of enquiry should be directed to 'spiritual' concerns and moral issues.

What about our spirituality; is it an ecclesiastical property? What is the meaning of God in the context of our real life and in the context of the economic system in which we live? What is the connection between capitalism and the concept of God? Is the Vatican a multi-million dollar business dealing with our spirituality? Is the idea of God a marketable commodity? Are the Pope and all the Catholic priests the salesmen of 'an idea' called God? Why people kill in the name of God? Why is the language of 'God' used as if to dismiss our fears and calm our inner anxieties? Why is "God

language” used by powerful leaders to kill innocent people? Where is the morality in it? In the Western world, why does the Vatican support the capitalist system and values? Why has God become a powerful ally of those who are the strongest in society? It does not help to know that the same God is invoked by those who are the weakest in society. Is it normal that powerful religious lobbies and leaders ignore the many mass killings carried out by the masters of the world? What is ‘faith’ if this abstract concept is removed from ecclesiastical dominion? Does it not mean that, in believing in a mighty God, what we are doing is denying our own capabilities, intelligence and mystifying our internal and external universe? End of story.

The ‘big events’.

“El barrio” was written in the years 2001 and 2002, and the big events of those years were the ones which took place in a couple of cities in the United States, the most dramatic one in the city of New York.

Since the effects of these events were very negative for the United States, the ‘events’ were deliberately transformed (an American strategy, in my view) into a world problem. The people of the world were made to feel very sad and sympathetic by the showing, over and over again, of the horrific scenes of the ‘event’ in New York, portrayed in detail on our TV screens. Of course, these were very unusual scenes on American territory. The strategy here was to land the people of the world with the problem of making them feel guilty, irrespective of the fact that millions of people belonging to many other nations of the world had already felt, on their own territories, the full force of American bombing. All of a sudden, millions were also made to feel suspicious and fears grew, among the innocents of the world, for what the United States would do in retaliation.

Millions opposed completely the terrorist attack and with reason felt all sort of sympathy for the ordeal of those trapped in the towers. (Among the victims there were workers of all sorts and nationalities) Sadly for the United States, millions of others felt that there were reasons to conclude that these “events” were an outcome of the many atrocities carried out by the United States against the people of other nations.

How relevant are the “events” in the context of the 11th of September, 1973?

We can see how a date, the 11th of September of the year 2001, will come to symbolise, in the minds of millions of people, the date on which the United States of America suffered the most serious setback in the short history of that country. This huge ‘popular’, sophisticated and, quite literally, imperialist country was humiliated in the eyes of the rest of the world, since everything they have at their disposal - money, technologies, military power, the most sophisticated intelligence network in the world, economic power, sophisticated organisations, political will, warfare experience, manpower, influence, and powerful allies - all in place to protect its vast interests and its people - was shown to be completely useless in a matter of a couple of hours, by a tiny group of people who could be counted on the fingers of two hands.

This is the power of the individuals whose type I have been trying to describe – those capable of achieving, with intelligence, will-power, ideology, faith and money, anything they want. Here we saw the power and the incredible effect on individuals of the thing that we call “faith”. Faith in what ? in Osama Bin Laden ? a former friend of America from Saudi Arabia, a ‘friendly’ Arab country with an appalling record on human rights ?

How interesting it is to compare the action of these terrorists with American support for terrorism in many areas of the world. Didn’t the government of the United States put in power, in Carlos’s homeland, a human monster called Pinochet?

Sadly, whatever the United States decides to do in Afghanistan, nothing will bring to life those who met a horrible death when the planes hit the Twin Towers of New York and in the Pentagon, the very place where many horrible crimes around the world have been organised in detail.

Nor can anything reverse the incredible humiliation suffered by the United States at the hands of a few individuals. (These are the facts without the rhetoric.)

The 11th of September will be forever a very important date in the United States' calendar because, for the people of the USA, everything that happened symbolised what that country has itself been doing, over the years, against other people in the world, without receiving any punishment for it.

The 11th of September - 1973.

As we read in Carlos's "Barrio", the 11th of September, 1973, is also a very important date for all Chileans; everything that happened in their country on that date, and for the subsequent 19 years, symbolises all that is evil in human nature. Part of Carlos's story, that of his barrio, and that of his country is directly linked to the Chileans' 11th of September - 1973. By an irony of life, everything that took place in Chile, on this date and after, is the result of direct political intervention in Chilean affairs by the United States. While the US was able to mobilise its powerful allies to combat its enemy, it could also afford to do everything in its power to condemn, forcefully, acts of terrorism on its own territory and use all its military force to combat it in Afghanistan. The Chilean people on the other hand, those millions who suffered hardship and terror at the hand of Pinochet, could do nothing against the richest nation in the world. There are powerful reasons for this: firstly what nations can afford to do anything against the more powerful nation in the world? Secondly, the Chilean Army acted on behalf of the United States to combat left-wing idealism. Thirdly, some Chileans begged for direct American intervention in their country. And lastly, the government of the United States and its multinationals wanted a coup in Chile, no matter what the consequences might be for the people of that country.

Like Chile, many other nations fell victim to the United States' interventionist policies. Sadly, we know that this will not stop until the superpower begins to feel that the power of the individual is in need of urgent medical attention.

Second thought

In my view, the essence of "El barrio" is the spirit and the atmosphere associated with Carlos's strong feelings and emotions about his place of birth.

Many Chileans living abroad, who had to leave their country as a result of the coup of 1973, view their country with a certain cynicism, as they no longer believe in the "magic" of the word "Chile". Carlos is one of those people who came to live abroad as an exile and this status alone has conditioned his thinking about his country, creating, as a result, conflicting feelings and views towards the people of his native land.

I am aware that many former Chileans exiles have become, with the passing of time, enigmatic characters, submerged in a variety of thoughts about their existence in a foreign country. Note that some of these former political exiles are doing very well in these foreign lands, thanks to their dedication, hard work and an incredible desire to succeed. In Dr Alfonso Molina, of the University of Edinburgh, Carlos has a friend from his barrio in Santiago who epitomises these characteristics.

My wife and I had the pleasure of attending the Inaugural Lecture given by Alfonso on his induction as Professor at Edinburgh University. He entitled his lecture :

Blending Science, Dreams and Action :

the life of a Research Programme in technology and strategy.

Alfonso gave this lecture at Edinburgh University on the 14th of March, 2002 and my wife and I were close to tears because his lecture, given in English to a wide international audience, marked the culmination of a long and painful intellectual process which had begun not far from where I lived in Santiago.

His lecture began with these words which rang in my ears :

It all started with a dream.

" Back in the early 1970s, as a young student of Electronic Engineering, I joined the pursuit of perhaps one of the largest dreams one can have: helping change society to improve the life of the poor, marginalised sectors of society. This was a dream of a society for the benefit of all. It was a time of large social movements and crisis in Chile, crystallising in the election, in 1970, of the socialist candidate, Salvador Allende, as president of Chile, under a wave of popular support with a

programme known as the pacific way to socialism. But this dream went wrong ! and Chile had its own 11th of September in 1973, many years earlier than the USA - 28 years earlier to be exact. ”

The particular way in which Chileans seem to see their homeland from a distance was perhaps the natural result of the diversity of experiences that they have undergone in different countries - each with their own social, political, economic and cultural intricacies.

Carlos, like his friend Alfonso, has been culturally and politically moulded by years of living in Scotland, in Carlos's case we are talking about 27 years. Scotland is a small but very proud country in eternal struggle, in cultural and political terms, with England. Carlos is undoubtedly a Chilean voice in Scotland but, in many respects, he has also a 'Scottish perception and a Scottish perspective' about Chilean events and culture. We cannot diminish the fact that there is a British dimension also to this perception, perspective and views. This perspective comes via England which is, as I have said, a powerful cultural force in Scotland.

British Democracy, even with all its imperfections, has had a very positive impact on Chileans who came to live in Britain as exiles. They knew that Chile was a democracy until Pinochet came to power but they soon realised that it was a democracy with a small "d" because, unlike British democracy, Chilean democracy never fulfilled the economic hopes of the working classes and the poor. For many Chilean expatriates, therefore, everything that is strictly Chilean becomes suspicious, questionable and blameworthy. Perhaps more than anything else, the second interview with Carlos will show exactly that.

In this context, one may ask what ideas about Chile and its people flow through the minds of those Chileans who came to live abroad as exiles after the coup, or what thoughts go through the minds of those who lost, in dramatic ways, their dear ones during the dictatorship. The family of Rolando comes to mind - Carlos's friend at the Chiflon. Carlos told me the story of the actor Oscar Castro of the Aleph Theatre Company, now residing and working successfully in Paris, whose mother and brother in-law, by the name of Juan Rodrigo Macleod, are part of the three thousand who were made to disappear by the Pinochet Dictatorship. (I mention Rodrigo because of the Scottish dimension) We must ask, what is the meaning of Chile for these families? What is their understanding of this place ? Carlos has been at pains to explain to me that it has been very difficult to avoid the individual and collective psychological processes which have taken place in the minds of all Chilean of his generation. It has been very difficult to avoid the following questions : who were the honest, the dishonest, the cynics, the opportunists, the naive ?, who were the heroes during the Pinochet regime : the Chilean economists known as the 'Chicago boys' whose economic policies helped to create incredible wealth for a few ? or those millions who survived the incredible hardship created as a result of their economic policies, imposed by force on the poor ?, Who were the pathetic {??} during the Allende Government, during the Pinochet's regime and during the Government of the *concertación*?

In a very competitive world, one is tempted to measure everything in order to determine who were the real winners and the real losers during these three different regimes. Carlos is tempted to point out that he has no doubt that the real winners have been on the one hand, the ruling classes found in so many layers of Chilean society : the entrepreneurs, the bankers, the elite of the military establishment, the landowners. The United States and foreign multinationals, on the other hand, have also won by having easy access to the opportunities organised for them by the political and economic elite in Chile. I recently read in the newspaper that Chile is a leader in Latin America in terms of competitiveness (20th in the world rankings) because it has put in place a good organisational economic structure (although Pinochet 'forgot' to put a modern sewer system into the cities of Chile!).

The real losers, as has always been the case, were the lower classes and Chile the country being despoiled of its natural resources.

“ yeah... we are mistaken if we think that the people in the thousands of poor barrios throughout Chile benefit from the natural richness of their country.”

This is the end of the thought.

