

Josh On

From They Rule to We Rule: Art and Activism

In the year since I made *They Rule* I have received many emails and one fax from visitors to the site. The fax read:

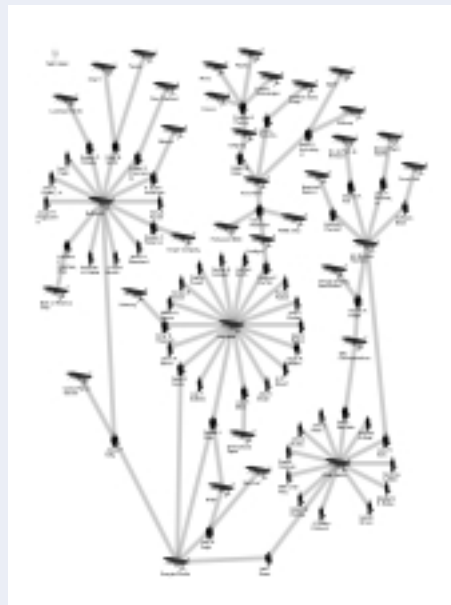
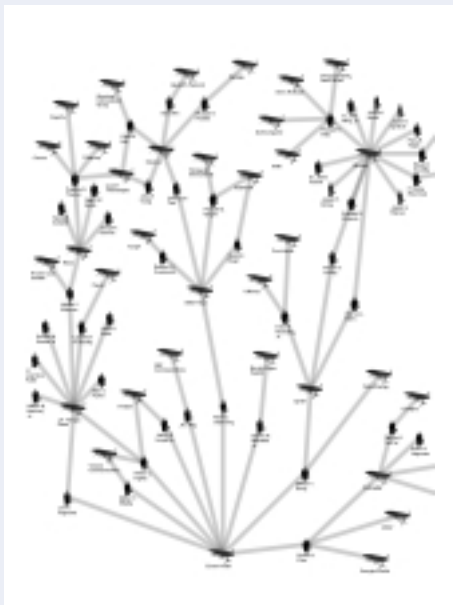
TO: Josh On
FROM: *** **

Hi Josh,
I was just at the *They Rule* website and I was fascinated, disgusted,
and scared all at the same time. What I need to know is: what can we,
the people do about it—that won't destroy the American economy?
I'm at a complete loss. Please feel free to email me at *****
Thanks—**

Making *They Rule*, I had an experience similar to the author of this fax. The interlocking directorates of the *Fortune* 100 companies fascinated me. As I compiled the data I was disgusted at the extent of the interconnectedness (over 90 percent of the boards in 2001 had members who sat on the board of at least one of the other the top hundred companies.) I was frightened to find that these board members often sit on government committees, or had been members of previous administrations. A quick look at the current administration confirms the connections between the state and the corporations. Before she became the National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice's name graced an oil tanker, an honor awarded her after serving on the board of Chevron. Dick Cheney was CEO of Halliburton, a major US oil company, which at the time of writing is under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission. George W. Bush himself worked in the oil industry for years and has close ties to the infamous Enron Corporation which were the major corporate contributors to his electoral campaign. So it is no surprise that Bush could say that "[t]he role of government is to create an environment in which businesses, small and large, can flourish. That's the role of government."¹

This uncommonly lucid remark from the President explains a lot about US foreign policy. Making the world a place where US business can flourish is the role of the US Government abroad. Corporations can not use military force to secure markets, they rely on the legitimacy of the state to carry out this brutality for them. After the US military victory in Afghanistan, Bush appointed Zalmay Khalilzad, a previous advisor to US oil company Unocal, who lobbied the Clinton administration for a softer line on the Taliban, as a United States' special envoy to Kabul.² No conspiracy theories need to be concocted to see that the President has been consistent in executing his vision of the government's role.

As I write this, the governments of India and Pakistan have the world holding our collective breath as they face off against each other with threats of nuclear war. It feels as if the outcome of this situation lies outside of our hands as individuals. If any individuals could be seen as having control it is "them", not "us". And the



“them” are the people represented in *They Rule*, maybe not be those people in particular, but it is their class—the ruling class.

If it is clear that “they” rule, then, as the author of the fax asks, “what can we, the people do about it—that won’t destroy the American economy?” I think that a brief look at the American economy is a good place to start. It is the world’s strongest economy, yet according to the *CIA World Fact Book* 12.7% of Americans live below the poverty line. Another group of Americans tightly grips resources that could alleviate their plight. In 1998 the top 1% of the US population owned 38% of the wealth and the top 5% owned over 60 percent.³ In such a situation, I think it is fair to ask if the American economy is worth protecting.

It is not the case that the rest of us, those not in this ruling elite, have sat back and passively accepted this situation. The history of America has been one of the struggles of ordinary people against the injustices of the time. Today there are many active fights against the rule of the profiteers. Teachers and healthcare workers have been protesting and striking for more resources for the social sector. There are many struggles against the environmental racism of the energy industry, against the racist “criminal justice system”, and against US militarism. Three years ago there was the famous “Battle of Seattle” where protesters expressed their anger against the corporate greed represented by the World Trade Organization.

Political art has often accompanied such struggles, but it has never been able to substitute for the struggles themselves. Despite the battle cry of Bertolt Brecht, art is not the most effective hammer with which to shape the world. However, it might be the spark that lights the fire, although many are content with just the threat, and would like to keep art politically dampened. Last autumn, I was invited to talk with a non-profit organization that lobbies corporate boards to be more environmentally conscious. They were interested in *They Rule* because it resonated with their idea of networking with the corporate board members and convincing them that they should seriously consider the roles and responsibilities of corporate governance. They preferred this co-operative approach, and rejected the immediate

necessity to light any fires. They viewed their work as successful if the environment got a mention in a company's annual report.

I think that we should try and light as many fires as we can. Howard Zinn says artists should give more to the world than just art—artists should be political. While he was at a conference of historians during the Vietnam War, Zinn and some others drafted a proposal saying "We historians think that United States should get out of Vietnam." Some historians said they agreed with the statement, but didn't think that it was their business as historians to comment on current issues. Zinn asked:

Whose business is it? The historian says it's not my business, the businessman says it's not my business and the lawyer says it's not my business, and the artist says it's not my business, then whose business is it? You mean we are going to leave the business of the most important issues in the world to the people who run the country? How stupid can you be?⁴

Artists have as much responsibility as anyone to be politically active, but that does not mean they should see their art as their political action. The revolution will not be a painting or a website, it will be the collective action of the majority of the people in society. And vice versa, art can suffer when its creation is dictated by the political needs of the moment. Marx advised Lassalle "to Shakespearize more, [...] I consider [...] making individuals the mere mouthpieces of the spirit of the times, your main fault."⁵ Political art is not a worthless pursuit, but it should be recognized that evaluating artistic merit and political merit requires a different set of criteria. As the cultural critic and revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky put it:

One cannot approach art as one can politics, not because artistic creation is a religious rite or something mystical ... but because it has its own laws of development, and above all because in artistic creation an enormous role is played by sub-conscious processes ...

Art is not unique in having a particular place in the order of human activity. For example, science and sport also have their own rules and methodologies. None of these spheres of activity are completely isolated from one another, but they all exist within the larger context of the necessary human activity of production. Engels outlined the perspective in a letter to W. Borguis:

Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc. development is based on economic development. But all of these react upon one another and also upon the economic basis. It is not that the economic situation is cause, solely active, while everything else is only passive effect. There is, rather, interaction on the basis of economic necessity which ultimately always asserts itself.⁶

Today the economy seems particularly assertive. The current worldwide recession has meant that the ominous bottom line strangles the development of useful and pleasurable gains in all spheres. Much of today's medical research is aimed toward reworking already existing treatments to get around patent laws. Money goes toward securing patents where it could have gone to distributing the existing medication. Drugs are produced which are profitable rather than those which are most needed. In sport, it can be hard to see the athletes through all the logos, and adver-

tisements. As far as reimbursement is concerned it is more than taking part that counts. In art, artists are forced to make art that conforms to the tastes of the gallery administrators, art buyers, theatre and hall booking companies, agents etc or else fund their own work through other means. Amazing and effective art can and has been produced under these conditions but it is by no means the norm. With this perspective on the limits of culture as an effective tool for political struggle in and of itself, how should an artist, or a designer or any other cultural producer orient themselves? A couple of years ago I read an interview with the socialist fantasy writer China Miéville. His view on the relationship between literary production and revolutionary politics has stayed with me:

When I write a novel I do it to tell a story and describe a world that keeps readers interested in turning pages. My job in that book is not to convince people of socialism—a 700-page fantasy would be a spectacularly inefficient mode of propaganda. But obviously as a political writer of fiction it's inevitable that I'm a writer of political fiction. I certainly try to engage with political ideas in my books. By doing so in fantasy, which has such a conservative tradition, you're engaging both with politics in general and with the politics of the genre you write in. There's politics in my books because it gives the worlds texture for me, and because I like investigating the ideas. If people do take away some of the politics then that's great, but I think I'd be setting myself up for serious disappointment as a socialist if that was my first aim with the novels. I don't think there's any replacement for traditional political activity and argument for pushing forward socialist politics.⁷

This is how I approached *They Rule*. Although I did not consider *They Rule* to be primarily an artistic project, I didn't want it to be a purely didactic experience. I wanted to explore ideas about information visualization, the Internet as a social construction as well as reveal an aspect of the relationships of the ruling class. Hopefully that process of revealing the connections is fascinating as well as provocative.

I am still excited by the potential of the Internet, but the fruits of this socially produced network are still controlled by private hands. The potential is revealed everyday; Napster, Lexus Nexus, etc. but it is always held back by private interest. Anybody should be able to search for any image, or published work and locate it and view it or listen to it. We have the technology, we just need a social structure that can keep up with it.

In *They Rule* I wanted to exploit the social nature of the Internet. The first thing that most Internet connected computer users do when they turn on their computers is check their email. The Internet has millions of potential social relations that can be formed, yet the formats for these communications has only just begun to develop. Designers of the communication channels on the Internet can affect the form that those relationships take. I could make a chatroom where swearwords are prohibited, or only the letter e could be typed, or only the person who had been in there the longest was able to type, or a chatroom in which everyone had to type in order to stay there, the possibilities are endless. Some formats will enable large-scale participatory debate, and other formats may be better suited for one to one personal communication. Companies are looking to shape these relations in specific ways, they see the relations in terms of customer and retailer, business to business, advertiser to consumer, adver-

tiser to game player, advertiser to reader, etc. etc. The tools they build reflect the specific needs of these relationships. Therefore, much of the innovation on the Internet has come not from the commercial sector, despite their hype, but rather groups of people who have wanted to forge relationships other than those normally practiced in the commercial arena.

They Rule uses a social filtering system. Visitors to the site can arrange and annotate the corporate connections they find, hiding some, stressing others and adding URLs to add to the qualitative information (and misinformation!) on the site. One of the easiest ways to browse the site is to view the maps that other visitors to the site have created. Some of the most interesting and startling connections are shown on maps produced by visitors to the site. While it was not the most innovative format, it does show the potential of what can happen when tools are developed that encourage lasting participation from users.

The Internet can collect, compute and display data using both silicon and social aspects to perform the tasks. The potential that this gives the world goes beyond the world of bits. In the early 1970's the president of Chile, Salvador Allende, hired the cybernetic management theorist Stafford Beer to create a regulatory system to help order the production and distribution of goods across the country. We do not know exactly how effective it would have been as the project was terminated by the US sponsored coup, which killed Allende and many thousands of Chileans. That the project existed opens the imagination to the possibilities of creating a system which could help organize the economy on the basis of what is needed and what is possible, as opposed to what is profitable.

There are sections of the economy today that are not directly governed by profit. The open source software movement is a good example of how much can be accomplished through co-operation as opposed to competition. The slogans raised by radical sections of this movement don't go far enough, though. It is not just intellectual property that is subject to theft. Other sectors of the economy have been shown to be just as effectively socialized. Even in the US there is a large public sector, much of the education system, the highways and even the military. However, the decisions about how these resources are divided are all made within the context of extreme inequity. The potential for a better world is everywhere we look. I live in the Mission District of San Francisco, there are homeless people on every block, but there are 58 empty commercial buildings in the Mission, and plenty of lofts with vacancy signs. Why do we let them rule so badly?

Arundhati Roy, the Indian novelist and activist is currently in her home New Delhi despite the threat of nuclear war. Journalists call her asking why she has not left, and:

The last question every visiting journalist always asks me: 'Are you writing another book?'

That question mocks me. Another book? Right now when it looks as though all the music, the art, the architecture, the literature, the whole of human civilisation means nothing to the monsters who run the world. What kind of book should I write?

Why do we tolerate them? Why do we tolerate the men who use nuclear weapons to blackmail the entire human race?⁸

In times like these art is insufficient. It can inspire, provoke questions but in the end we have to act, and it is through our action, our strikes, our protests, our organ-



izing that we will overcome the system. It will not be as Kalle Lasn of "Adbusters" magazine imagines:

Then we wait. We wait for that inevitable day of reckoning when the stock market crashes, or the world is otherwise destabilized. On that day we storm the TV and radio stations and the Internet with our accumulated mindbombs. We take control of the streets, the billboards, the busstops and the whole urban environment. Out of the despair and anarchy that follows, we crystallize a new vision of the future—a new style and way of being—a sustainable agenda for Planet Earth.

It wouldn't take too many of us. A global network of 500 passionate, committed artists, designers and multi-media pros could pull off the coup.⁹

That is the logic of culture as a political tool taken to its extreme. His underlying assumption is that the problem with society is that we are all terminally co-opted by brain-washing advertisements. Perhaps the system will collapse under its own contradictions. But if we are to replace it with something that works, we will need more than a coup led by some media savvy artists. The ruling classes have proven in history that they are willing to take the world into barbarism before they will give up their spoils. We will have to be an organized force willing to wrest control from their hands.

The majority of the people already run society day to day, we built the Internet, we built the railways, etc., we should be making the decisions about how these things are made, used, and distributed. In the face of the current situation it is understandable that many people lack hope for the future. The overwhelming military force, the impending crisis of global warming, the very real threat of global nuclear war, are all more than just scary thoughts. The reality of Stalin's USSR, Mao's China and Castro's Cuba do not offer an attractive alternative to fight for. As people struggle to get by, burdened by large debts and job insecurity, the future looks uncertain. But we can do better, there is an alternative. Art can point to it, but we have to make it. We need to start organizing for this now, by building up confidence through our resistance. If some of that energy spills over into art then so be it, if that then inspires others to organize, great. But as artists, as people, we should not shy away from the most important task that confronts us, organizing collectively to achieve a world in which we can honestly say: We rule.

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3 Source: www.inequality.org/factsfr.html

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