

# APEC, Sydney and the Australian Corporate Dystopia

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I've been away from Australia for a while. Every time I come back, the country seems to have edged a little closer towards a corporate utopia or dystopia, depending on your point of view and this week is the height of it.

I arrived at Sydney airport prepared for the customary transit ritual whereby one gets off a plane, goes through a security checkpoint, and then gets back on a plane. One is often greeted by sniffer dogs, but always by massive billboards lining the airport corridors, always advertising some financial institution or luxury product tailored to the high-end audience presumably passing through. This time there were no dogs, but the advertising was spot-on. Welcome to the APEC Australia 2007 Business Summit, it announced. Sponsored by Chevron. Ah, perfect.

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APEC was essentially an invention of the Australian Labor Party, in particular of Paul Keating, who wanted to be able to promote neoliberal economic policies in the Asia Pacific region. Like the World Trade Organization and the international financial institutions, APEC was explicitly created to promote neoliberal economic policies at the international level the same 'free trade', investor rights and freedom of capital that have decimated peoples all over the world. Unlike the WTO, APEC delivers no treaties or binding declarations, just meetings, discussions and non-binding statements. If the WTO is brazenly transparent with its quasi-legislative and quasi-judicial mechanisms, APEC is insidiously opaque with its back-door, diplomatic route to the same goal.

APEC does not have member nations or countries, but it does have 21 Member Economies. The website of the summit announces a wonderful egalitarianism to treat nations equally, according equal respect for the views of all participants regardless of the size of their economy not regardless of their size, or their population, or anything with moral value. There is Mexico, brutally repressive of the uprising in Oaxaca last year, suffering from NAFTA, debt crises, superexploitaion in the maquiladoras, the collapse of social expenditure, ruthless foreign competition, and mass urbanisation and megaslums; led by Felipe Calderon, elected last year under dubious conditions. There is Hong Kong,

with an undemocratic government subservient to China, failing to observe basic human rights; led by its Chief Executive Donald Tsang. There is Malaysia, corrupt, authoritarian, holding prisoners without trial, jailing bloggers. There is Thailand, still under military rule, heavily censoring the media, the internet, under martial law, repressing dissent; led by Interim Prime Minister Surayut Chulanon. There is the Philippines, where state security forces are accused of brutal murders of activists, community workers, and the media, and as a result an ally in the 'war on terror'; led by Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. There is Peru, impoverished and superexploited by international capital; led by Alan Garcia, who refused to implement the National Human Rights Plan. There is Brunei, still a sultanate in the 21st century. There is Russia, engaging in brutal repression in Chechnya with impunity, clamping down on freedom of expression, disappearing and torturing. There is Indonesia, murdering and torturing in West Papua, authoritarian, prosecuting people for expressing opinions; led by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a retired general who served under accused war criminal Wiranto in East Timor. There is China viciously repressive, viciously capitalist, viciously industrializing and leaving the global climate in its wake. Of course there is Australia stealer of East Timor's oil, regional US sheriff, and declining democracy. And there is the USA world emperor, imperial invader, torturer and increasingly security state.

Even the supposedly less criminal elements cannot escape blame. Canada's troops are implicated in dozens, possibly hundreds, of civilian deaths in Afghanistan. Chile, still coming to terms with years of brutal dictatorship, represses student protests and ill-treats detainees. And so on. There are no good guys. But then again, history should teach us that, at least so far, we should not expect any.

The economic policies prescribed by APEC are widely discredited and have ceased to be taken seriously by those concerned for the economic development and future of the world. Though of course it is impossible to capture the full situation in all its complexity here, one can consider two broad sets of economic policies characterising much of the world, particularly the developing world. The first set is that promoted by APEC along with other international institutions like the WTO, World Bank and International Monetary Fund: namely, opening markets to free trade, ending tariffs and subsidies, shrinking the public sector and public services, wholesale privatisation, and for the indebted third world, restructuring the economy as a debt repayment machine, exporting cash crops and raw materials for hard currency; while the same rules are never applied to the industrialised world. Then there is a second broad set of policies, without official sanction from the 'winners', the creditors, and those who have the power to write the rules of global economics: building a public sector to provide essential services and protect the least well off; state investment in housing and welfare, and research and development; protection of new and emerging industries until they are globally competitive; capital and foreign exchange controls; developing internal consumer markets in general, taking the notion seriously that economics in the real world is not as simple as 'market knows best', and that state intervention and social programmes can guide social and economic development. Almost without exception, those nations which have followed the

first set of policies have suffered massive failures: suffered vast and worsening levels of poverty and inequality, suffered financial crises, and those crises have provided opportunities for creditors and international institutions to stack the tables further against them. Almost without exception, those countries which are rich or developed applied the second set of policies through most of their development.

Almost without exception, when free trade has been forced on poor nations, they have been forced to compete with rich nations whose competing industries are subsidised, protected or highly technologically developed. When poor nations are forced to restructure their economies to prioritise export industries, they are denied the opportunity to develop internal consumer markets and hence develop the demand that will pull national industries up to viability. When poor nations are opened up as cheap sources of labour for multinational corporations, working conditions are oppressive and profits are repatriated elsewhere. The ‘liberalisation’ of capital and oppressive debt obligations ensure that entire national economies can be ruined by ‘free’ flows of transnational capital and capital will flow speculatively and irrationally, and will flee in panic at the slightest hint of ‘instability’, whether from popular uprisings, military conflict, or nationalist policies.

But these are only the broadest brush strokes of the international situation, which varies widely with local conditions, markets and institutions. It is true that there are cases where free trade has improved economic growth in some poor nations. But as we should expect from a cursory examination, such growth tends to be captured by an elite of owners, shareholders and foreigners. Repressive conditions ensure that only the minimal portion of growth goes to workers in the form of increased wages; and the threat of capital flight ensures that conditions remain regressive and repressive. Where growth comes, it is growth for the rich, growth that comes with inequality, growth that comes with mass poverty, massive population transfers as industries are laid to waste, and the growth of vast mega-slums in major cities all around the world.

Above all, whatever mechanisms of development are possible and available, and were used by the presently rich nations, they are systematically denied to the third world today. The third world today remains crippled by debt, forced to repay odious debts at interest, forced to accept international exploitation, prohibited from taking collective action for national economic self-defence, permitted only to resume their traditional colonial roles as exporters of raw materials, trapped in permanent impoverishment.

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Even in the rich nations, pursuing this first set of policies ‘neoliberal’ policies, as they have become known has deeply disturbing effects. Even when you can win at the game internationally, turning the whole of society into a market game has broad antisocial effects, for both obvious and subtle reasons. Australia, it seems, is just such an example of a society slipping ever more entirely into the ideal of a neoliberal society – a corporate utopia, or a social dystopia, depending on one’s point of view.

What should we expect from the wholly neoliberal society? In its ideal form,

there are no citizens, just consumers and workers; everything is consumption or production; everything is a market; everything is to be treated 'rationally', applying an irrational and pathological calculus of extreme self-interest. Consumers should consume, including consuming entertainment, and meekly accept the prepackaged happiness that is offered to them in the appropriate markets. Workers should be flexible, flexible to be hired and fired at will at the market rate, with no oppressive monopolies such as unions to distort the market. Nor should governments distort the market with such interventions as social welfare, unemployment assistance, job retraining or other indicators of minimal civilization. Workers should accept their contracts, expect no favours or assistance from the state, and compete with their fellow workers for jobs. All of society that is, all of the economy should be a competition; co-operation becomes cartel behaviour. Increases in efficiency should not lead to increased wages that is, after all, wage inflation but such increased wealth should go towards investment and 'growth', that is, capital. There will be growth, as long as growth does not go towards wages or towards social programmes. Wages are perhaps supposedly constrained by a minimum for nourishment and survival but when wages are set at a market rate, with a pool of reserve labour set to drive down wages, and without any collective action possible to apply bargaining pressure, that such constraints apply is not clear.

That in the approach to corporate utopia, one can expect layoffs from businesses pitted against subsidised international competitors, layoffs from a downsized public sector and private industries unable to compete with cheap industries, massive increases in inequality, increases in poverty, and vast inflows of wealth to a narrow elite, is empirical truism but in a market utopia there are opportunities for everyone who is prepared to work enough and out-compete the rest. It does not matter if many, even most, are 'losers' as long as there is the possibility of winning, we can obediently compete and play to win. We are to consider only our economic self-interest, maximising our wealth as best we can. To consider, rationally, our other interests, or even, heaven forbid, the interest of others, is 'irrational'. We should all try to be winners, not losers the possibility of a situation where there are no losers never arises. The philosophy permeates even supposedly non-economic activity, with our latest acquisitions and our prepackaged consumer entertainment, whether sport, movies, or celebrity gossip. There is no room for social connection, no room for political connection, no room for acting as a human being concerned for all human beings for that is deviant behaviour.

But this will be well-known to all those in the Western world. It is certainly dominant and mainstream in Australia.

Of course, the indicators of this descent of Australian society are manifold. They are both causes and effects of the rolling back of social democracy in the country. They are seen in economic statistics poverty, real wages, inequality, unionisation. They are seen in upturns in xenophobia and racism. They are seen in the recent phenomenon of patriotic racist riots where young white males wrap themselves in Australian flags and bash Australians of other colours. They are seen in the language used in the dominant discourse in media and electoral

politics, which is now almost exclusively the language of business. They are seen in the fixation on interest rates in electoral politics and by citizens who respond to them. They are seen in the absence of any real political opposition, other than perhaps the Green party; not even from academia, from the labour movement, or elsewhere. And they are seen in the language of leaders, the declarations of leaders, and the substance of meetings such as the APEC summit.

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APEC, like other summits elsewhere, concerns itself with the approach to corporate utopia, and the continuance of the outrages of neoliberal economic policies throughout the Asia-Pacific region. From those who understand such policies such as those who are on the receiving end outrage is visceral, outrage beggars belief, we choke with rage. Massive protests erupt. The protests are of a very pure sort for the symbols of the system congregate in one place, and the protest is against both their individual crimes and the Idea they promote, with all its associated catastrophe.

For those who are not on the receiving end, those who can live in rich ignorance, the global elite who benefit from the policy, the view is somewhat different. An army of professional economists is deployed to justify the unjustifiable, with theories divorced from reality, with assumptions cloaking humanity in crude materialism, with insanity masquerading as 'rationality'. The mainstream media cannot report on the effects of the policies, which are too obviously horrible, too obviously unjust, upon any more than a cursory examination and more, undermine the comfortable apathetic lives which are best for sales, undermine the system of exploitation which allows them and their societies to prosper, exposes the corporations which own them, and undermines the global structure of economics itself. Of course in democracies journalists are perfectly free to tell the truth but self-censorship of the substance of international trade summits is clear to anyone reading mainstream newspapers.

Instead, the media finds a distraction. On the one hand there are photo opportunities and handshakes and press conferences, dutifully relaying the official version of events. On the other hand there are the protestors. Since the inequities of global trade policy are never mentioned and carefully avoided, then there must be nothing to protest about, and the protestors, therefore, must not be legitimate, but violent thugs set only on causing destruction.

It is not always fully appreciated how much words construct reality. This is true in the philosophical or psychological sense that they we construct our thoughts and mental pictures through the power of words. It is also true in the concrete physical sense that those words lead to actions which make those words come true. And the issue of violence at protests for global justice is a prime example. It is a fascinating example of a self-referential loop but the philosophical curiosity in this case has devastating consequences

Anyone who has ever gone to a protest of any but the most acceptable sort that is, any protest which actually protests those with power will know that the mainstream media coverage of the protest, and the protest itself, are barely recognisable as the same event. If there are a hundred thousand peaceful demonstrators and ten who get in a scuffle with police, one can rest assured

where the coverage will lie. If there are only peaceful demonstrators, in fact, with less than about a hundred thousand one is barely assured of any coverage at all. If the protest confronts an acceptable event involving the powerful, the event will be covered dutifully, with a sentence or two as footnote noting the violence which marred the pleasantries. And when the violence is covered, one can rest assured that it was caused by protestors, who are accused of attacking police, even as footage rolls showing unarmed protestors being clubbed with batons. It will usually turn out that protestors are cleared of charges; it often turns out that the police planted *agents provocateurs*; unsourced allegations of protestor provocations usually turn out to be false.

In the mind of the police, one expects violence, because such protests are overwhelmingly described as violent, even if in fact they are overwhelmingly peaceful, and even if the violence is the fault of the police. In the mind of the neutral public, protestors are violent thugs because they are always described as such in the media, without contradiction. In the mind of protestors, as a result, the mainstream media is a lost cause, essentially functioning as a propaganda organ, and cannot be trusted; and the violence, if it resonates as reality, displays the brutality of police repression. Minimal violence creates exaggerated talk of violence, which in turn engenders violence.

And so it goes, in the lead up to a global justice protest. Well in advance, reports circulate of violent groups planning disruptions no source usually given. Police warn the public. Police warn against violence. Police obtain new equipment such as water cannon, clear jail cells, set up mobile prisons, obtain special powers; protest is everywhere associated with violence. Fears of terrorism are raised, conflated with the fear of protestors; indeed, draconian police powers used against protestors derive from anti-terrorism legislation. The substance of the summit is never discussed beyond approving clichés of official propaganda usage; on the rare occasions that the subject matter is discussed, economists or other ‘experts’ are called in to ridicule the misguided irrational protestors; the protest is never credited with legitimacy. The unknowing public trembles in fear, at best confused, at worst grateful for the authorities’ efforts; the knowing public, including protestors, knows to expect police repression. Violent words resonate and associate with protests. Peaceful protestors are scared off. Those with a mistrust of authority have their suspicions confirmed by the obvious propaganda and demonisation, encouraging extreme actions. Violence itself becomes more legitimate, the authorities forfeiting their legitimacy. For protest organisations to declare the protest ‘peaceful’ becomes an act of surrender to illegitimate authority is it not, after all, merely a tactical choice not to confront authorities which have declared moral bankruptcy? Tactical discussions ensue; violent factions are strengthened, possibly with the help of police provocateurs; peaceful factions become just another faction. Protestors may split; they are always wary of police infiltrators. Reactionary media reports gleefully any indication of violence, further proof of intended thuggery. Politicians rail against the disruptors of their precious events; always they affirm the right to protest but only as long as it is done peacefully; the insinuation being that the planned protests are violent, and therefore illegitimate. As the day approaches,

protest groups are scrutinised for hints of violence. Police warn they cannot guarantee public safety if the protest becomes violent. A whole aura of tension, fear, power and violence permeates both sides of the issue; and as these tense struggles proceed, the original injustice of the summit is duly forgotten. It is forgotten that the true violence is perpetrated on a global scale; it is forgotten that the worst criminals wear suits, possess affable personalities, and have control over the authorities, effective control over the media indeed, control over the truth. Violence becomes more likely at the protest itself; and the cycle begins anew.

It has become completely familiar to those interested in global justice and who have followed the global justice movement, and there is no difference in Sydney. The police have obtained new water cannon. The city is walled off by 5 kilometres of 2 metre high fencing, truly a triumph of democracy. Police, using new powers, issue exclusion orders, banning specified individuals from the area, without any judicial process. Police circulate rumours of manuals published by protest groups advising violent tactics. Talkback radio is clogged with debates on the various evils of protestors. Protestors are reported to corrupt the youth by persuading them to come and protest. Not one word of the outrageous content of the meetings. Not one word of the counter-summits and teach-ins and lectures given by activists and others who understand the situation. Fighter jets fly sorties over Sydney Harbour. Helicopters hover above. The city is shut down, essentially a post-apocalyptic militarized zone.

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Shouldn't world leaders, however illegitimate, be allowed to meet and discuss international co-operation? Even if the agenda were benign which it is not the leaders and their crimes would be no more legitimate. Coming to a democratic nation, illegitimate and criminal leaders should expect utter disbelief on the part of the citizenry, that matters have been able to come to this.

Illegitimate leaders should expect nothing less than the outrage of the population at their presence; illegitimate leaders promoting illegitimate policies, even more so. There is nothing to be gained from violence except greater repression and revocation of non-violent principle; but equally so, there is no reason to offer any welcome.

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A congregation of criminals awaits. Several among them including the host could surely be charged with the crime of aggressive war, the supreme international crime, the same crime for which the Nazis were hanged at Nuremberg. Several more could be responsible for grave war crimes and breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law. Others are real live dictators, their existence an affront to history, unthinkable in the twenty-first century.

Where are we? Is it a war crimes trial? Will they be arraigned, interrogated and prosecuted?

No, it is an international economic summit. They will be lauded, pampered, and congratulated. And they will continue to pursue policies that entrench vast global injustice, vast iniquities, and refuse to take action to avoid environmental destruction.

It is up to concerned citizens to do something about it.