

On Umair Muhammad's 'Confronting Injustice: Social Activism in the Age of Individualism'

Tuesday 20 May 2014, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 21 April 2014).

A new and outstanding book by Umair Muhammad, *Confronting Injustice: Social Activism in the Age of Individualism*, presents a strong case for the necessity of socialism to counter the impending calamity of global warming.

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Muhammad, an MA student at York University in Toronto, ends his 174-page text by quoting anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin: "The bold thought first, and the bold deed will not fail to follow." *Confronting Injustice* is indeed bold in exposing all the market-based evasions and half-measures urged upon those seeking to end environmental destruction.

Muhammad is keenly aware of how hard it is for the newly radicalized to find a personal path in the face of immense social contradictions. The first half of his book responds to the issue posed by its subtitle, "Social Activism in the Age of Individualism," presenting an extended discussion of moral philosophy for social activists.

Age of individualism/age of conformity

The "age of individualism," Muhammad says, is in fact an "age of conformity," enforced by corporate-determined mass consumption. The populace is compelled to take part in conspicuous consumption, caught up in what Muhammad, quoting revolutionary Black writer Richard Wright, terms the "lust for trash."

But the dominant reality of free-market "individualism," he argues, is growing inequality and destitution. What we face is not a "free market" but a slave market; not "free trade" but slave trade; not "freedom of contract" but "slavery of contract."

Muhammad urges us to avoid servitude to short-cuts to knowledge like YouTube and to break from external electronic stimuli "which keep us out of touch with the thoughts inside our heads." He calls on us to embrace spaces to "read and write, to learn, to discuss, to think." Practicing what he preaches, Muhammad presents vivid quotations from a wide range of writers and folklore of many cultures. When he dissects the sources of poverty, for example, a quotation from imperialist apologist Rudyard Kipling rubs shoulders with those from socialist philosopher Karl Polanyi and

Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe.

At a recent discussion of *Confronting Injustice*, I noted that most comments from the many students present addressed the moral issues raised in its first two chapters. Decades ago, I and my friends agonized over these same issues as we took our first steps in radical politics. But it was much easier then to find answers than it is now in the context of the relentlessly individualistic culture of neoliberalism. Muhammad has done well in his original and effective argument for commitment to collective and transformative social action.

Making the planet unliveable

Confronting Injustice presents us with a stark picture of what escalating ecological destruction and global warming mean for our collective future. “We are making the planet unliveable,” Muhammad says. He dismisses the feeble achievements of global climate negotiations as “negotiating the earth away” – and even such sham measures as the Kyoto treaty have now been discarded. The deep cuts in carbon emissions required to protect the planet cannot be achieved through market mechanisms or technological fixes, he says.

Although Muhammad favours a carbon tax, [1] he insists that “the climate crisis requires deliberate measures.” These must include, in the rich countries, “drastic cuts in consumption and waste production” accompanied by global “cooperative engagement on an unprecedented scale,” he writes. “Climate change is a social problem that requires a social solution.” To find this solution, “a collective of individuals must be democratically constituted,” and it will set in motion the building of what Muhammad, citing Marxist economist Michael Lebowitz, calls a “solidarian society.”

Muhammad envisages a participatory democracy, with decentralization of decision making through new democratic institutions such as community and workers’ councils. He warns, however, that corporate power will not sit idly by; it will strike back. “Any political system, no matter how it was arranged, would be forced to bend to the will of the existing economic elite if their power was left untouched. Therefore, to truly establish a democratic social arrangement we would want to establish socialism.”

The discussion of socialism that follows is brief and suggestive. The book then closes with a rousing vindication, on the example of Martin Luther King’s defense of the Vietnamese victims of U.S. aggression, of specific struggles for limited objectives, which can grow and join together in order to grapple with the overall task of social transformation.

An unfinished analysis

The analysis of this transformation is the most unfinished portion of *Confronting Injustice*. This is perhaps inevitable, given the limitations of liberation movements today. Muhammad’s text, strong in its main thrust, is restricted by inadequacies in dominant theories of environmentalism and socialism.

This incompleteness seems evident in Muhammad’s presentation of the need for economic “degrowth,” a call heard today from many radical ecologists. [2] The concept is not wrong, but it begs for precision. It applies not to all economic activity but to material production; not in the poorest countries, but on a world scale; it is directed not at individuals, most of whom are entrapped in consumption patterns imposed by capitalism, but at the social system as a whole; its implementation will go hand in hand with an improvement in the quality of life for the vast majority.

Such provisos are indeed found elsewhere in Muhammad's text.

A stress on "degrowth" may suggest a campaign to reduce personal consumption of material goods in rich countries, overlooking the degree to which personal lifestyle, as Muhammad rightly emphasizes, is imposed by social structures shaped by the capitalist profit system – the cause of ecological crisis and the barrier to its resolution.

Those who are exploited, oppressed, and alienated by the profit system, even if still trapped in its destructive mechanism, must be seen as not the problem but the solution – the force that can ultimately carry through the changes Muhammad is advocating.

If communities of working people join to achieve the needed goals for pollutant reduction, the resulting struggle will, as Michael Lebowitz has often emphasized, enable them to transform themselves and carry out the needed reshaping of the economy on their own initiative. Muhammad's text strongly underlines the need to build such communities.

Priority of mass movement

And what of socialists forming a government? "Where state power can be captured, it may be able to help us to more effectively take on capital," Muhammad writes, but "it is the work of the mass movement which will be the most important to building this order." He is right in stressing the priority of mass action. We must also clarify, however, the indispensable role that must be played by an authority representing the population as a whole in asserting democratic rule against plutocratic resistance and coordinating the economic transformation needed to counter global warming, even as the shape and implementation of change is determined democratically from below.

(For more on this, see Michael Lebowitz on socialism and creative energy on this website [3].)

But it would be wrong to fault Muhammad for what is, in fact, a weakness of contemporary schools of transformative ecological thought, one rooted in the rudimentary state of popular movements at this time. Answers will be found as we progress through future social struggles, and, here, *Confronting Injustice* has a distinctive strength.

The book is itself a product of the experiences and discussions of a community of student activists, who are acknowledged in its pages. Among them are Alexandra Fox, an able designer with a flair for typography; copy-editor Jordyn Marcellus; and 16 other named collaborators.

Confronting Injustice is a energizing and rewarding book that deserves close attention. We look forward to future writing from Umair Muhammad and his able associates.

Review by John Riddell, April 21, 2014

Confronting Injustice is available for sale and for download at <http://www.confrontinginjustice.com/#get-the-book>. A portion of sales proceeds goes to Jane Finch Action Against Poverty.

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<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/04/21/confronting-injustice-social-activism-in-the-age-of-individualism/>

Footnotes

[1] “Minimally, a straightforward and steadily increasing carbon tax is required to increase the cost of fossil fuels so that their use goes into decline” (p. 123).

[2] Degrowth has been defined in different ways, but the Wikipedia description presents a frequently heard interpretation: “Degrowth thinkers and activists advocate for the downscaling of production and consumption—the contraction of economies—arguing that overconsumption lies at the root of long-term environmental issues and social inequalities.”

[3] Available on ESSF (article 31954), [Cuba Needs to Unleash Creative Energy - On cooperatives, self-management, the state, the XXth Century experience....](#)