



# Struggle or peace?

**Julien Gross** is a hero. Locked up four times for his beliefs—now 96 years old and living safely in fashionable north London, his surroundings today belie his less comfortable origins and the hard and often violent road that delivered him West. Land&Liberty met him at his Hampstead apartment to talk about what it takes to change the world

First comes food—morals follow on  
(Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt d  
Bertolt Brecht *The Threepenny Opera*)

JULIEN GROSS is one of those rare people who has managed to live in balance a full and loving personal life with the life of an active, radical reformer. That balance was struck asunder in December last year when “I experienced the greatest tragedy—my companion of 70 years—Andrée, died, after suffering a stroke.” Though not a day-to-day activist like himself, his wife’s humanity, wisdom, good judgement and abundant love had completed him as a person. “Now I feel like an orphan” he says. “I’m constantly in fear of losing the alertness of my faculties. I’m saved only by the spiritual feeling of her constant presence around me.”

But Gross has always had to be sensitive to what are—inevitably—the opposing pulls of the home life and the life served for humankind. The joy of Gross’s life is that he has not had—as Ian Crichton Smith put it—“to sacrifice private love for public responsibility”. Most are not so lucky.

*For I have watched while Spain, struck dead,  
Salted the eyes within my head...*

*Today I clearly understand  
The gulf that cracks across the mind,  
Strife on behalf of human-kind,  
The choice that catches at our breath,  
Immortal dying or a living death.*

*Mine is a hopeless death alive  
Because I did not force my love  
Out of my splendid private grove,  
Because when History strode by  
I loved a woman in my secret sky.*

V.2, 9-10, poem XVIII  
*Poems to Eimhir* by Sorley Maclean, 1971  
translated by Iain Crichton Smith

It’s not that Gross hasn’t seen the attraction of the quiet life of the ‘splendid private grove’. It just hasn’t been his way. In fact, when it comes to ‘quiet’, his life has been anything but. Gross always has felt too strongly the responsibilities of a reformer, and still does, for that other way to be his: the fight against injustice has been his calling. “I can’t help but speak the truth: when you see it—truth—what else is there to do?”

A recent incident in one of the perhaps less-major causes in Gross’s life might be illuminating here: Gross has been instrumental in a local campaign to prevent Vodafone erecting a mobile phone mast on the roof of his apartment block. He cites health concerns as his motive.

One day recently there contractor’s crane arrived the start of the working ported a still embattled victory, but warning “it was that how Gross saw movement for reform—

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But the drive to just too for that matter—is either/or decisions. It’s of the better of two mi truism is of course tru that a better world is n worse world created— world: witness the grea though Gross is keen t the tyrants” should no Karl Marx’s name.

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he recognises and laments the decline of that institution—and the ascendancy of its nemesis the ‘gastronomy’. A rather easier project to put into effect, Gross enthusiastically awaits the launch, someday, of [www.guardian.co.uk/landreform](http://www.guardian.co.uk/landreform) as the home of daily thoughtful comment on the human being’s basic relationship with its environment. A greater endeavour would be founding a university chair in land—‘land’ pure and simple, the stuff of human life, as opposed to ‘land economy’ or some such ‘professional’ thing. Establishing a building cooperative that will let people “sidestep and not be sold out to the banks” would be an even larger undertaking. (He argues society should operate “as one big cooperative—it’s the ideal model—a huge nineteenth century movement, and we don’t speak about it now.”) And he wants reformers to reconsider Marx—this is at the core of his cry for political organisation: “Henry George has certainly pointed us to the goal—but Marx gives us the means.” All in all, Gross wonders, summing up his proposals—given what the worldwide movement is actually doing today—“Is it time for a new start?”

Gross is a man of dignity. It’s an important notion for him, lying at the heart of his ideas: “Above all things”, he says, “we must protect human dignity. The taking of dignity, humiliation, these are things we must immediately condemn, without reservation.”

For Gross the fundamental purpose of reuniting people with their birthright in land is the restoration of their human dignity—dignity before their maker (his sentiments though not his words), and before their peers. For Gross, human rights are fundamentally about that—*dignity*—and without equitable access to the gifts of nature and community he cannot see how that dignity might be achieved. “You cannot have human rights without access to the sources of life” he says. Gross sees the movement’s failure to forcefully render this equation, which directly links ‘land’ and ‘human rights’, as a disastrous error: “we speak about human rights only *en passant*” he laments.

Gross is saddened by much in today’s world. He doesn’t see the politicians or economists as being at all of the necessary stature. He is despairing of the events around 9/11 and the West’s response. He knows “land is of course the issue”, and is outraged by the management of the media-controlled public discourse.

Recently, London itself, his adopted home, has somewhat soured to his taste: “It’s a playground for the Oligarchs” he says with quiet sadness—“land values paid for by the billions who suffered under Stalin”. The privatisation of his homeland’s natural and

common resources—started under Gorbachev but continued under Yeltsin, Putin and now Medvedev—is a subject of deep anger for Gross.

Gross’s ‘biological’ home—Ukraine—is a worry. His country has (again) become a focus between East and West—the possible flash point for a major conflagration ahead. The country’s recently-achieved WTO membership has been controversial. More problematic is that Ukraine is considered to be an ‘EU hopeful’—with all that means by way of backstage goings-on; and has

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been promised an invitation to join NATO. None of this is at all to the liking of the neighbour to the east: and it is not likely that Russia will stand idly by while it all comes to pass.

Gross also wonders at the future of that other once—and would-be-again—superpower—China. He sees that country’s new-found dynamism based on the labour of its common people: and he does not think the country will last. He sees the state splitting up into its constituent parts, almost certainly in violence.

Still, overall, as a global community, Gross is less unhelpful for humanity because, despite the “turmoil”, “there is more that holds us together than separates us.”

The worldwide movement for land and tax reform is a broad church. When its supporters find themselves admitting a political inclination, they find their co-travellers a diverse bunch. Rent-for-revenue reformers come in every form, from right wing libertarians—across the full conventional political spectrum—to left wing democratic socialists and Marxists. Gross is most certainly closer to the latter than the former: but in a movement of individuals he may himself be something of a one-off.

Still, with all the diversity of experience, outlook and ideas within the movement—

which Gross certainly helps enrich—it is the movement’s common insight of a truth, greater than mere politics, which continues to unite it. And Gross is glad for that.

While for most (if not all) reformers the free market has a key role to play in advancing the goal of justice, Gross is wary of it: “If we *rely* on the free market we have no way of speaking for our children” he says. But then that might be the proper purpose of government.

A sacred cow of most free-marketisers is the corporation: but it’s an institution Gross would slay without hesitation. “The corporation is a big black power that hasn’t changed in the last one hundred years” he declares. He sees the corporation as the power behind the imperial throne: “I think it looks like the American President does what he likes—but that’s not really how it is. Who might be behind him? Whose interests are being served by his actions?”

Individual corporations come and go, reflects Gross—they change name, some grow bigger or cut back; profits are posted, then losses; they’re bought out, their structure liquidised, or just their assets ‘received’—but through all this Gross sees the activity, the ownership, the mentality of incorporation enduring, and of course spreading. He’s profoundly disturbed by it—and, critically, by the corporation’s increasing enclosure of the world’s resources. “Take a rifle; it’s iron and coal no matter,” he says enigmatically: “ask *RTZ* the price of going to war”.

Gross sees the corporate media industry as a specifically dangerous thing: “They are the real dark power” he says. “They present their facts as if they were the views of the people.”

And the media’s representation of the current economic crisis, in which house prices are beginning to fall within people’s reach, outrages him. “It very much supports the interests of the banking sector,” he says. “A mortgage is a chain around your neck, under the guise of progressive capitalism, to wring the last drops from the sweat of working people.” In terms of the daily misery created by unattainably-high house prices—beyond token notice “people don’t talk”. His engagement in current affairs, the concerns of the common people, is undiminished.

But Gross’s life is quieter now, than in his younger days: less outward activism, though his mind is as active as ever. Weekday evenings a circle of neighbours meet for lively debate. He’s proud of its diversity—it’s attended by Greeks, South Africans, Arabs, Sikhs. “We talk”, he says: “and anything goes”. His neighbours ask him ‘what is georgism?’ “I don’t tell them: I say ‘I will speak to you as a georgist, and you will see.’”

Perhaps that’s all, in the end, it takes: to speak—and like Gross, to act—as reformers.

**L&L**

## Julien Gross—activist, witness

Julien Gross was born in 1912 in Olevsk, Russia, a small city in Zhytomyr Oblast, 150 miles northwest of Kiev, in present-day Ukraine. Gross has been not just a witness but an active participant in many of the key historical events of twentieth century Europe. He saw the end of the Russian Revolution and the civil war which followed. He witnessed Trotsky “haranguing the newly equipped Red Army marching on Poland—and a few months later the same returning in tatters.” They had been followed by a new Polish army—the Hellers, “brutally anti-Semitic”.

Gross became a political activist. Moving to Warsaw he joined the communists and fought the White Shirt fascists. His political activities earned him his first term in detention—two and a half years in prison.

In 1934 he crossed the Carpathian Mountains to Czechoslovakia seeking political asylum. But he was double-crossed by a Communist Party contact, and he landed back in jail. Luckily he managed to escape before interrogation. He was able to expose to the Prague press the infiltration of the NKVD (the forerunners of the KGB) to the League of Civil Liberties and the police.

An intervention on his behalf in the Czech senate allowed him to stay on in Prague, where he mixed with the eminent Marxist and socialist politicians and theorists of the day. But later that year he left Czechoslovakia on a fake passport. He travelled west as a Czech tramp. Supported by “surprisingly still-functioning Jewish communities”. Gross tramped across the breadth of Germany, where he observed “with a frozen heart children parading with wooden swords and rifles, and chanting anti-Semitic songs.”

He reached Holland in the aftermath of the worker’s uprising in the Jordan district of Amsterdam, which he joined. Crossing over to Belgium he met Tito in Brussels—“who to me did not look at all like a minor Stalin to come.”

On the train down to France Gross had a “near death” experience: “My *artistically* produced passport was of the same kind that the Ustaša (Croatian terrorists) had—who had just killed the King of Yugoslavia and the French President, and were hunted on all the French borders. I learned about it while reading the evening paper in the train, but it was too late to leave the train.” Following a scrape with passport control he somehow, once again, escaped the clutches of the authorities.

In Paris he joined the anti-fascist movement. His first act was facing down the French fascists—Les Croix de Feu—in the Place de la Concorde. “It was the first time I experienced shooting up-close. People were falling around me.”

Along with comrades from the old jail in Warsaw he launched the first anti-Stalinist paper *Que Faire*. He participated in the French *Front Populaire* and, now down south, organised strikes in 1936 in Toulouse.

Gross then joined forces with the Spanish POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*) against the fascists in the Spanish Civil War. Already hunted by the Stalinist and French police, before long it would be the Spanish police and the Gestapo too.

In 1937 he’d won the world first prize for window dressing. But this was still work with a political message: his window in a department store in the southern French city of Pau extolled the old republican call of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity)—whilst the official emblem of imminent Vichy France, permitted by the Germans, was *Work, Family, Fatherland*. The display led to him being denounced by an employee of the store. By then he was supporting the French Resistance and using his art for anti-Vichy and anti-Hitler propaganda. Gross had to flee.