

SUSAN VANCE AKERS GEORGE DCL

Mr Chancellor,

In one of his more lucid moments, Karl Marx wrote:

“The Philosophers have only interpreted the world.
The point, however, is to change it.”

Few indeed are the philosophers who can rightly claim to have changed the world for the better in their lifetimes. Karl Marx, for one, was so convinced he could make no such claim that he even denied being a Marxist! By contrast, Dr Susan George has provided the rigorous intellectual foundations for the campaign against world poverty, which continues to renew the face of the earth.

An American by birth, from the age of twelve Susan Vance Akers began to develop a passionate interest in the culture, language, life and times of France. Initially feeding this interest through reading, she deliberately chose to study for her first degree at Smith College, Massachusetts, precisely because it offered a Junior Year abroad. Thus it was that at the age of twenty Susan got her first taste of the realities of life in France. She loved it, and still does.

The intellectual level of the conversation at the Sunday brunch table in a flat on the *Rue du Cherche-Midi* fascinated her. Susan in turn fascinated the owner of the flat, the successful lawyer Charles-Henry George; the feeling proved mutual and 46 years of happy marriage ensued, blessed with three children and four grandchildren. Once all of her children were in school, Susan felt an urge to return to study herself – this time reading Philosophy at the Sorbonne. Politics did not yet count amongst Susan's passions.

That was changed forever by the wars in Algeria and Vietnam. Both conflicts were linked to the collapse of the French Empire. The Vietnam war exposed the limits of the American 'empire' for the first time: it also shattered Susan's cherished conceptions of her native land. The atrocities, lies, and cover-ups were starkly at odds with the founding principles of the United States. Susan became involved in the Paris-American Committee to Stop War. This was subsequently outlawed by the French government, as they connived with the Nixon Administration to close down the space for criticism on both sides of the Atlantic. It was in this atmosphere of repression that Susan collaborated with the Directors of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington DC to establish a new arena for free thought on neutral territory. Thus in 1973 the Transnational Institute was founded in Amsterdam; today Susan Chairs the Board of this forum of opinion-formers.

It was at the World Food Conference in Rome in 1974 that Susan's recent lessons in philosophy and political hard-ball came together in a creative rage. Shocked by arrogant complacency and feeble arguments of the agribusiness representatives who shamelessly dominated the Conference, Susan set about writing her own critique of the global forces responsible for world hunger. The result – “How the Other Half Dies”, published in 1976 – was an instant best-seller, which rapidly became the bible for the nascent global campaign against poverty. Susan soon found herself caught up in a whirlwind of speaking and writing engagements, which has never since abated.

Let's hear from Karl Marx again:

“Anyone who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without feminine upheaval. Social progress can be measured exactly by the social position of women”.

The life of Susan George provides a singular affirmation of the validity of this prophetic aphorism. Her upbringing and life experiences mercifully spared her the insecurities which impel many women to do the work of male chauvinists for them. Nevertheless, Susan still encountered many males who were petulant at the thought of a middle-aged mother-of-three presuming to set the agenda on world hunger. A PhD from the

Ecole de Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales ultimately proved an effective talisman against such nonsense.

In 1984 activists from the poor countries asked Susan to turn her attention to debt as a cause of world hunger. The period of intensive research which followed yielded her second bestseller, “A Fate Worse than Debt”. This was followed by further incisive analysis which demonstrated that the mechanisms and structures which enslave the South with debt are also detrimental to the welfare of most people in the North. The rest is, as the cliché runs, history: the campaigners against international debt had their ‘new testament’, paving the way for all that we are celebrating here today.

Mr Chancellor, through her research, writing and public speaking, Dr Susan George has become an indispensable element of the force that binds innumerable campaigners together. She has articulated the needs of the poorest in the most effective manner, providing invaluable ammunition, for them and their allies, in the struggle for justice. For this honourable service to humanity, I now ask you to bestow upon her the Degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Paul Younger