

RADICAL FUTURES

Harbingers of change, peeks over the horizon, maps of Utopia—and other strategies for keeping hope alive

No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear

In times of dread, artists must never choose to remain silent.

TONI MORRISON

CHIRSTMAS, THE DAY AFTER, IN 2004, FOLLOWING THE PRESIDENTIAL re-election of George W. Bush.

I am staring out of the window in an extremely dark mood, feeling helpless. Then a friend, a fellow artist, calls to wish me happy holidays. He asks, “How are you?” And instead of “Oh, fine—and you?” I blurt out the truth: “Not well. Not only am I depressed, I can’t seem to work, to write; it’s as though I am paralyzed, unable to write anything more in the novel I’ve begun. I’ve never felt this way before, but the election...” I am about to explain with further detail when he interrupts, shouting: “No! No, no, no! This is precisely the time when artists go to work—not when everything is fine, but in times of dread. That’s our job!”

I felt foolish the rest of the morning, especially when I recalled the artists who had done their work in gulags, prison cells, hospital beds; who did their work while hounded, exiled, reviled, pilloried. And those who were executed.

The list—which covers centuries, not just the last one—is long. A short sample will include Paul Robeson, Primo Levi, Ai Weiwei, Oscar Wilde, Pablo Picasso, Dashiell Hammett, Wole Soyinka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Lillian Hellman, Salman Rushdie, Herta Müller, Walter Benjamin. An exhaustive list would run into the hundreds.

Dictators and tyrants routinely begin their reigns and sustain their power with the deliberate and calculated destruction of art: the censorship and book-burning of unpoliced prose, the harassment and detention of painters, journalists, poets, playwrights, novelists, essayists. This is the first step of a despot whose instinctive acts of malevolence are not simply mindless or evil; they are also perceptive. Such despots know very well that their strategy of repression will allow the real tools of oppressive power to flourish. Their plan is simple:

§ Select a useful enemy—an “Other”—to convert rage into conflict, even war.

§ Limit or erase the imagination that art provides, as well as the critical thinking of scholars and journalists.

§ Distract with toys, dreams of loot, and themes of superior religion or defiant national pride that enshrine past hurts and humiliations.

The Nation could never have existed or flourished in 1940s Spain, or 2014 Syria, or apartheid South Africa, or 1930s Germany. And the reason is clear. It was born in the United States in 1865, the year of Lincoln’s assassination, when political division was stark and lethal—during, as my friend said, times of dread. But no

prince or king or dictator could interfere successfully or forever in a country that seriously prized freedom of the press. This is not to say there weren’t elements that tried censure, but they could not, over the long haul, win. *The Nation*, with its history of disruptive, probing, intelligent essays sharing wide space equally with art criticism, reviews, poetry and drama, is as crucial now as it has been for 150 years.

In this contemporary world of violent protests, internecine war, cries for food and peace, in which whole desert cities are thrown up to shelter the dispossessed, abandoned, terrified populations running for their lives and the breath of their children, what are we (the so-called civilized) to do?

The solutions gravitate toward military intervention and/or internment—killing or jailing. Any gesture other than those two in this debased political climate is understood to be a sign of weakness. One wonders why the label “weak” has become the ultimate and unforgivable sin. Is it because we have become a nation so frightened of others, itself and its citizens that it does not recognize true weakness: the cowardice in the insistence on guns everywhere, war anywhere? How adult, how manly is it to shoot abortion doctors, schoolchildren, pedestrians, fleeing black teenagers? How strong, how powerful is the feeling of having a murderous weapon in the pocket, on the hip, in the glove compartment of your car? How leaderly is it to threaten war in foreign affairs simply out of habit, manufactured fear or national ego? And how pitiful? Pitiful because we must know, at some level of consciousness, that the source of and reason for our instilled aggression is not only fear. It is also money: the profit motive of the weapons industry, the financial support of the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned us about.

Forcing a nation to use force is easy when the citizenry is rife with discontent, experiencing feelings of a powerlessness that can be easily soothed by violence. And when the political discourse is shredded by an unreason and hatred so deep that vulgar abuse seems normal, disaffection rules. Our debates, for the most part, are examples unworthy of a playground: name-calling, verbal slaps, gossip, giggles, all while the swings and slides of governance remain empty.

For most of the last five centuries, Africa has been understood to be poor, desperately poor, in spite of the fact that it is outrageously rich in oil, gold, diamonds, precious metals, etc. But since those riches do not, in large part, belong to the people who have lived there all their lives, it has remained in the mind of the West worthy of disdain, sorrow and, of course, pillage. We sometimes forget that colonialism was and is war, a war to control and own another country’s resources—

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meaning money. We may also delude ourselves into thinking that our efforts to “civilize” or “pacify” other countries are not about money. Slavery was always about money: free labor producing money for owners and industries. The contemporary “working poor” and “jobless poor” are like the dormant riches of “darkest colonial Africa”—available for wage theft and property theft, and owned by metastasizing corporations stifling dissident voices.

None of this bodes well for the future. Still, I remember the shout of my friend that day after Christmas: No! This is *precisely* the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.

I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom. Like art. **150th**



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Unpredictable Weather

Forecasting the future is perilous, but we have to believe in change—or at least be willing to gamble.

REBECCA SOLNIT

MOST FORECASTS OF THE FUTURE PRESUME THAT SOMETHING in the present will continue to grow and increase its power or influence. It's as simple as doing a math problem on compounding interest or multiplication tables.

Orwell did this intentionally in 1984, creating the vision of a postwar Stalinist Britain circa 1948 that was taken to its absurd and appalling conclusion. Less imaginative people, however, genuinely believe that history moves in a straight line. Alarm about the “population bomb” arose from the assumption that women would continue to have babies at the rate they were worldwide in the 1960s. But thanks to reproductive rights and other factors, birthrates have plummeted so dramatically that some nations, from Germany to Japan, are now worried about a steep population decline.

Likewise, people unhappy about the Bush administration seemed to imagine that its power would only increase until it became some petro-cowboy version of the Thousand-Year Reich. People happy with the administration's policies also failed to anticipate how brief its ride atop the wheel of fortune would be. The Obama victory in 2008 was as out of sight in 2003 as same-sex marriage was in 1977, when Florida-orange-juice spokesmodel and bigot Anita Bryant was successfully fulminating against homosexuality.

There are monumental changes under way that seem as if they will only continue: the decline of homophobia, the widening of rights and privileges from white Christian men to the rest of us, nonwhite and nonmale. But there are backlashes against these things as well, and the other way to call it unpredictable is to say that we can't foresee which tendency will hold sway a century or more hence. Mostly, what we can learn by looking backward is that who and what we are now—sexually, socially, technologically, ecologically—was not only unpredictable but unimaginable a century or even a half-century ago. So is who and what we will be in another 100 years.

History is rarely linear. The cast of characters is never announced in ad-

vance, and the story lines are full of left turns, plot twists, about-faces, surprising crossroads and unintended consequences. In a recent article for Politico, Elana Schor notes: “As Keystone's problems imprint themselves on the nation's political DNA, environmentalists and local advocacy groups are using the same template that has stalled it for six years to stoke resistance to fossil-fuel projects from coast to coast. Word is out in the oil and gas industry that NIMBY is the new normal.” As I write, almost no one knows how President Obama will ultimately handle the Keystone XL pipeline, but we do know that the struggle to stop its construction has had many ancillary effects. For example, the climate activists fighting Keystone have made the Alberta tar sands, numerous pipeline projects, the oil-by-rail system, and the larger problem of carbon emissions and climate change far more visible.

The struggle against Keystone has also catalyzed remarkable coalitions—for example, the Cowboy and Indian Alliance of rural peoples from the Great Plains, who gathered in the nation's capital last April, horses, chaps, war bonnets, alternative-energy policies and all. Under the linear theory of history, we'll decide if this was a successful movement based on the veto (or approval) of the pipeline, but as Schor points out, the effects are not linear; they ripple outward, like a rock thrown into a pond. Or they snowball. Or they catalyze some new action.

The same is true of the younger divestment movement as it spreads even farther around the world. Hundreds of investment portfolios, from college endowments and pension funds to church holdings, have been divested of their fossil-fuel stocks—but that's far from the only thing the divestment movement has done. Like the resistance to Keystone, the movement has called attention to the broader issue of climate; generated activism and networks, particularly around universities; and shed considerable light on the financial risk of investing in what is now called “the carbon bubble.” With this, it has become possible to see not only that we live in the Age of Fossil Fuel, but that this age is coming to an end.

Activism always has these side effects. What the Freedom Summer accomplished cannot be measured only by what it did or didn't do in Mississippi in 1964; it changed the lives of its many young participants, who went on to do remarkable things over the ensuing half-century in innumerable fields. Hurricane Sandy, I was told recently, turned many New York City employees into people passionately concerned about climate change.

Among our few certainties about the future are the following: climate change is here, it will get worse, and it is essentially irreversible. What's uncertain is whether, through extraordinary effort, we will meet the crisis as we should, with a speedy exit from the Age of Fossil Fuel, or whether that age will drag on and foreclose the possibility of our choosing the least rather than the most terrible future. We are now essentially hostages to the small group of people who benefit most from the fossil-fuel industries, as well as the politicians in their pay—although remarkable victories have been won against them in recent years, from Ecuador to Nigeria to New York State.

The next few years will be crucial in steering us to-

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