**The Revolution Will Not Be Televised (But It Just Might Be Filmed):**

**Reflections on Dog Years: Solidarity and the European Refugee Crisis**

*Burst the Bubble*

I grew up in suburbia, in sunny Southern California. One of my earliest memories of primary school is looking at a map of the world on the classroom wall, when I was in the first grade. I was six at the time, it was the fall of 1979. My teacher, Mrs. Ione, pointed to Los Angeles on the map. “We are just south of Los Angeles, which is the biggest city in California, which is one of the 50 states of the United States of America, which is in North America, which is in the Western Hemisphere of the planet earth,” she explained, while tracing her long, skinny fingers across the boundaries drawn on the map. This was news to me. I already knew that L.A. was in California, and that California was in the U.S.A., but I remember reeling at the revelation that the U.S.A. was located inside some other, bigger unit, that the U.S.A. was not the same thing as the entire world.

Though she had located the U.S. both in the north and in the west, it took a lot longer for the fact to sink in that the country in which I was born was not at the very center. And so the north and the west long signified for me the center.

In the literal center of that map, though, there was Europe. This was the place where the history of my country began, I was told. The civilization from which my nation descended, and to which it still belonged.

The first time I lived outside of the United States, indeed, outside of Southern California, for any extended period of time was my junior year in college, when I spent the academic year in Spain on an education abroad program. Why had I chosen Spain? Because I wanted to learn to speak fluent Spanish. Why Spain and not Latin America? Because, after all, Spain was in Europe, it had history! And besides, it was safe.

The safety was a particular draw. l had learned in my home and in my schools and in my church that hatred towards peoples or places was wrong, that it was prejudice, bigotry, chauvinism, vice. But fear was another matter. Fear of the “inner city,” for one. There were those exits on the 105, on the way up to UCLA, the ones I was warned not to get off at for gas, certainly not after dark.

Spanish cities were different from Latin American ones, and from U.S. ones, for that matter, so I had heard. There were no guns, and few if any dark places too scary to go to after dark.

I had grown up inside a suburban bubble, was a victim of bubble-consciousness, so to speak. And of comic-book consciousness, to boot. With narratives of vigilante super-heroes vanquishing a vast array of evil villains, consumed in bulk from as far back as my memory can stretch, filling my fantasy world, and reinforcing the main motifs of the whitewashed, implicitly white-supremacist, patriarchal, militarist, nationalist narrative that I learned in school.

This is the key to how systems of domination are perpetuated, via the imposition of such mental schemes – schemes which serve to confine our consciousness, to filter our consciences, to constrict our sensitivities, to undermine our solidarities. To render our resistance, our will to resist, half-hearted and inconsistent at best.

Like they say in all those 12-step programs, the first step in the long road to recovery is to recognize that you have a problem.

*Tear Down the Wall*

By now, I’ve lived in Europe for most of my adult life. In some ways, the contrasts in the terms of political debate and the contours of public consciousness between the U.S. and Europe can seem quite striking. But in crucial ways, Europeans live inside a bubble, too. A bubble of wealth and opulence for some, of consumer comforts for most, in a world full of so much crushing poverty. A bubble of effective constitutional freedoms in a world full of so much despotism and tyranny. A bubble indeed, or more precisely, a fortress. A fortress whose foundation, or at least cement, is the conceit of civilizational superiority. A conceit which can and has been mobilized in the form of racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic nationalisms, resurgent across much of the European Union, around which a militarized fortress continues to be constructed, and in which a fortress mentality continues to rise.

The so-called “refugee crisis” both exposes and exacerbates this disturbing trend of an increasingly toxic ideological climate in Europe, a climate which poses a formidable obstacle to responsible action on the part of European leaders, by triggering the fear that should they behave rationally and responsibly, in accordance with humanitarian values, they will be held accountable, punished at the polls. It is thus lamentable but not surprising that, in response to the “refugee crisis,” EU policy-makers have focused their attention and resources nearly exclusively on the construction of the militarized fortress, allegedly capable of “weathering the storm,” and diverting the “flows” of refugees and other migrants away from the EU.

The fortress is deadly. Indeed, it is the deadliest such fortress in the world, a dubious distinction for a Union that prefers to be depicted as a beacon of human rights and democracy. The fortress is also costly, short-sighted, and ultimately ineffective, even counterproductive. If policy-makers were able to approach the “crisis” rationally and humanely, they would certainly pay much more energy and attention to the underlying structural crises and human tragedies from which the refugees are fleeing.

Make no mistake, the flow of political and economic refugees out of the Middle East and Africa cannot be stopped, only diverted. At least so long as wars continue to rage, and misery and un-freedom remain the order of the day. Until that day comes, such tactics of diversion will ultimately only serve to force many of those who are fleeing obviously horrible situations into ever more dangerous and more expensive paths to the European Union. Meanwhile, many others, those who are “successfully” diverted by the militarized fortress away from the European Union altogether – that is, from the richest countries with the most resources, with the most state capacity – they will be forced to stay in places with poorer and more tyrannical, often unstable, sometimes even failing states, places located just outside fortress Europe, in the “near neighbourhood.” When they do not end up dead.

To make matters worse, efforts to curb the flows of refugees have led to ever closer collaboration and coordination with often brutal security forces in these neighbouring countries, thereby effectively exacerbating the problem of state tyranny, rather than concentrating resources on collaborative projects more conducive to “human development.” The EU’s dirty deal with Turkish President Recip Tayyip Erdogan, denounced by the Council of Europe, is unfortunately but the tip of the iceberg in this regard.

The root causes of the “refugee crisis” are to be found in the dynamics of global capitalism, especially the profound inequalities it generates, as well as in the dangerously-polarizing, de-stabilizing and lethally-inept, ongoing, Orwellian “War on Terror.”

Malcom X’s contentious claim about the assassination of John F. Kennedy being an example of the “chickens coming home to roost,” by which he meant, “a result of the climate of hate,” remains extremely relevant today.

The blowback of terrorist attacks on the streets of European capitals serves to intoxicate the atmosphere more still, further conjuring a climate of collective hate and paranoia. Tragic and traumatic as it may be, this blowback is nevertheless predictable.

The legacy of Europe’s colonial past may be suppressed, but it is not forgotten in the collective memories and certainly conditions the multiple loyalties of Europe’s own marginalized Muslim minorities. This makes Europe’s neo-colonial present, the continuing injustices and aggressions by European powers in the formerly-colonized world, all the more dangerous and ultimately self-destructive. The chickens are bound to come home to roost. It is only logical, as Malcolm explained, it is a result of the climate of hate.

The spiral of violence, indeed, the dialectic of violence and repression, both at home and abroad, continues to gain momentum. The reflex response of European authorities, the response of ever more surveillance, ever more militarized police forces, ever more slashing of civil liberties, ever more Islamophobia in the press, is but a moment, a twist, in this self-destructive spiral, an escalation immanent within this negative dialectic.

It is important not to exaggerate the extent of the problems posed by refugees, or for that matter, by terrorist attacks on European soil. Compared to the near neighborhood, the European Union has vastly more resources and currently hosts only a very small portion of the globe’s refugees. It also remains among the safest places in the world in terms of the risk of violent death.

Indeed, the fact that the so-called “refugee crisis” and the risk of terrorist attacks are so closely associated and so salient in the European press and public debate is itself partly an indicator of the extent of xenophobia and especially of Islamophobia intoxicating public opinion throughout so much of contemporary Europe. Though it also partly reflects a semi-conscious recognition on the part of European citizens that the two “problems” have the same root causes.

Be that as it may, the bottom line remains: European political leaders desperately need to re-assess their excessive reliance on repressive packages of “fortress-building” and “War on Terror” policies. But their ability to do so is inhibited by the toxic ideological climate that these short-sighted and reckless policies have already unleashed.

*Towards a Revolution in Consciousness*

How can this deadly dynamic be defused? Nothing short of a revolution in consciousness is required. The bubble-consciousness must be burst, the comic-book consciousness vanquished, the fortress mentality besieged. The will to struggle for justice, for freedom, for equality, for humanity, must be rekindled. Absent a critical mass of citizens and subjects convinced and willing to struggle for such internationalist, radical democratic, indeed, revolutionary commitments, nationalist ideologies will remain hegemonic. In turn, so long as nationalist ideologies remain hegemonic, the unjust global hierarchies and systems of domination that they serve to legitimate, and that are propelling humanity to the brink of extinction, will not be dismantled in time. The task of dismantling them is as urgent as it is difficult. Time is running out.

The revolution in consciousness will itself require ever-greater collaboration among activists, academics, and artists. Activist communities committed to social and environmental justice have been isolated and have succumbed to in-fighting for too long. Academics have remained aloof and silent, when they have not been rendered complicit. And too many artists have spent too much energy producing weapons of mass distraction.

The artists in the Craft-Theatre crew would like to help light a fire. Their powerful new film, Dog Years, is a participatory-documentary of sorts, one that provides a much-needed perspective from the frontlines of the refugee crisis in Europe. The film follows the group’s immersion into a network of local and international grassroots refugee-rights’ activists on the isle of Lesvos, near the border separating Turkey from Greece. It combines footage of dramatic rescue scenes on the shores of Lesvos, alongside in-depth interviews with local and international grass-roots activists, as well as with a few refugees themselves. The local and international activists can be captivating, and some of them are particularly inspiring as role models. The film also includes a good deal of educational and often thought-provoking commentary from UN officials, from academics, and even some politicians, each of whom speaks to different dimensions of the “refugee crisis.” (Full disclosure: this academic is included in the film, though the reader will be much more likely to recognize the great Noam Chomsky, who also appears, lucid as ever).

The interviews with the refugees themselves are perhaps not sufficient to drown out their cries, cries that frame them first and foremost, if not exclusively, as victims. Refugees are victims, of course, but they are also political subjects, often with fairly sophisticated political convictions, in no small part because of their first-hand experience on the frontlines of the global “War on Terror” and in the liminal spaces of the global border regime. Given the demagoguery of the right wing tabloid press, the recognition and framing of refugees as victims, rather than as “criminals,” “extremists,” or “potential terrorists,” is of course a crucial component of public consciousness-raising. But revolutionary consciousness and international solidarity ultimately requires even more. It requires us to be able to glimpse their subjectivity, even beyond their victimhood, to capture their sense of agency, even in the throes of desperation. It requires us not only to talk about them in humanizing ways, but to be able to listen to them closely.

On the other hand, what is most powerful and most effective in the film are the quasi-confessional, quasi-therapeutic reflections of the CRAFT Theatre crew members themselves. They are brave enough to turn the gaze of the camera upon themselves, to reveal for us their thoughts and emotions, their often raw responses to the traumatic events they have come to witness up-close. We as spectators get to watch up-close as these young artists struggle to grasp the full significance of what they’ve witnessed, and as they begin to pose very hard questions about what is to be done. In other words, we as spectators find ourselves on the frontlines of their struggle to transcend the confines of their own European and American consciousness and consciences. As they struggle towards international solidarity, as they struggle towards revolutionary consciousness even, towards a revolutionary will to struggle. It is a difficult struggle in its own right, the struggle towards the will to struggle. I, for one, certainly empathize with this struggle of theirs, this struggle of ours, and share their sense of urgency, too. Let us hope they light a fire.

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