

Amid despair, grounds for new hope

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In this moment, it is essential to take full measure of both how bad things are and the possibilities for developing a more viable and humane alternative.

Readers of a certain age may recall the stereoscope from high school geography classes. The stereoscope is an instrument with two lenses that allows the viewer to look at two photographs of the same object or place taken at slightly different angles, with the result that the image appears to merge into a three-dimensional image. The flatness of thought common in the speech of demagogues, and in the more debased reaches of the online public sphere run by private corporations, is often marked by a failure to think from more than one angle. Thinking through a single lens produces the same flattening out as looking at an image through a single lens. Thinking stereoscopically or, better still, through multiple lenses, enables much richer modes of apprehension and reasoning.

For Frantz Fanon, one of the reasons why colonial thought is so pathological is that it splits the world in two, into the coloniser and the colonised, each confined to separate spaces and assigned fixed meanings. Fanon argues that if it is not open to real reflection, anti-colonial thought can sustain this crude view of the world and collapse into “a brutality of thought and mistrust of subtlety”. In the postcolony, the new elites – what Fanon called the national bourgeoisie – will often seek to sustain the crude modes of understanding and thought first imposed by colonialism because if the only lens through which to see the world is that of the coloniser and colonised, it becomes impossible for the people to see their new rulers as new oppressors. This is precisely why Jacob Zuma’s repressive and kleptocratic regime sought to shape the public sphere with the aim of imposing a single lens for making sense of the world. Zuma, and his propagandists, did not want people to simultaneously recognise and oppose enduring colonial realities and the utter debasement of the emancipatory project under the rule of the ANC. In psychological terms, this kind of ideological project takes the form of monomania, an obsessive focus on one thing.

The imperative to throw our apprehension of the world into relief by thinking stereoscopically is permanent and does not just arise in the face of repressive regimes. In the current global crisis, it is entirely necessary to invest attention and thought into all that is going so wrong in terms of health, economic and political systems, our relation to the natural environment and much more. It is urgent and necessary for us to take full measure of just how bad things are.

Beyond the distraction

In South Africa – where there is routine and frequently fatal state violence, a massive and growing economic crisis, and a state that often continues to be an instrument for the enrichment of a predatory elite rather than providing social support – this can be overwhelming. Psychologically, it is not unlike standing on a beach and watching an incoming tsunami. But in the famous phrase from James Baldwin, “Nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

The widespread projection of the image of the good father on to President Cyril Ramaphosa at the beginning of the lockdown was not just fantastical, it was also a dangerous distraction from the urgent necessity to confront reality.

But at the same time as we face all the horrors of reality, we need an equal awareness of the seeds of a different future that are sprouting in the present. There are many shoots, some more tender than others, that need to be recognised and nurtured.

Among the grounds for new hope is that this crisis has left the authoritarian and demagogic emperors of the Right naked in the eyes of much of the public. The collective failure of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi and Boris Johnson to address the pandemic effectively has seriously damaged their standing, along with that of the political projects they represent. Their failure is in stark contrast to a country like Vietnam, brutalised by the French and then pulverised from the sky by the Americans, and yet without a single recorded Covid-19 death at the time of writing.

The collapse of the credibility of the Right opens up significant possibilities for alternatives. The movement that cohered around Bernie Sanders in the United States, and then the beautiful explosion of the refusal of racialised police violence across the US, and subsequently in many other countries, opens up equally significant possibilities for building a more humane world.

Emergency brake

The sudden changes to ordinary life and commerce during lockdowns made it clear to people around the world that the way things are is a choice, and that we can choose, to borrow a metaphor from Walter Benjamin, to pull the emergency brake on the train rushing into economic, environmental and political disaster. As the air became cleaner and the rivers ran clearer, it became apparent that with sufficient collective will we can stop the further destruction of the environment. When private hospitals were nationalised in Spain, it became clear that public health needn't be a matter of private profit. Here in South Africa, new forms of autonomy and solidarity have emerged in the shadow of a brutal and corrupt state. There are the community action networks in Cape Town, new forms of solidarity in some neighbourhoods in Johannesburg and, in Durban, moves towards building food sovereignty from below, organised by democratic structures on occupied land.

The future is not fixed. It will be shaped by the balance of forces and those forces are, ultimately, shaped by human choice and action. Jeff Bezos can be forced to pay tax. Amazon can be ceded to the democratic management of its exploited workers. Facebook and Twitter can stop being run as social industries for private profit and re-engineered in the interests of building a more democratic public sphere.

Environmental wreckage can be stopped. Every child can be taught to play a musical instrument. The school can, in the words of Roberto Mangabeira Unger, be “the voice of the future and recognise in each young person a tongue-tied prophet”. Every teenager can be provided with a selection of great works of literature from around the world. Healthcare can be organised around the public good rather than private profit. The normalisation of police violence can be refused. The migrant can be welcomed as a neighbour rather than condemned as an enemy. The autonomy of women can be affirmed as a central and unmoveable principle of basic decency. Capital can be subordinated to society.

All this and much, much more is possible. But to begin to realise a humane future, or even simply a viable one, we need to see and think stereoscopically, to fully apprehend both the horror and the hope that resides in the present. And the shoots of hope in the present need to be tended with all the care and commitment that we can muster.

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